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Daybreak

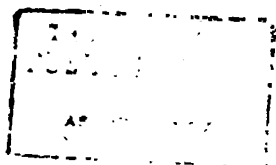
*by the
Author of High Noon*





DAYBREAK







A miniature of the Grand Duchess Sonia, painted at the time of her marriage to Crown Prince Stefan of Sardalia. The portrait depicts Her Grace as somewhat more mature than she appeared at the famous ball at the Summer Palace.

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DAYBREAK

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BY THE AUTHOR OF
"HIGH NOON"

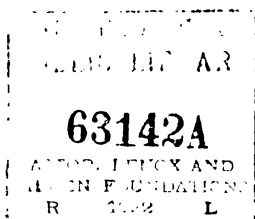


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DAYBREAK

DAYBREAK

CHAPTER I

LET us understand each other at the beginning,—you that read this book and I that write it. For it is imperative that we be in sympathy.

There are some who would not care for the story that is set down on these pages, since, after all, it is only the tale of a young man's love. Therefore, if the magic of soft arms and clinging lips no longer awakes in you the thrill of life and sets your pulse athrob with the divine fire, I warn you to close this modest volume, for—alas! it is not for you. But if you are one of the immortals,—it matters not whether you be old or young

in terms of the body—to you I can promise a few hours far away from the work-a-day world. Yes—if you are one of that happy throng to whom the gods are kind, one of the fortunate band of the elect whose souls age cannot wither, then to you and you alone, this book is dedicated. You will not profane the sanctuary. Sweet words, though ever-so-gently whispered, will find soft echo in your sensitive, quivering heart-strings.

Had Hubert Aldringham not been sent down from Oxford, much to the dismay of his respectable family, and especially of his estimable married sister, Lady Henrietta Verdayne, he would never have experienced the great adventure of his life. Or, to put it differently, had Hubert thought it worth while to attempt to explain away a little escapade with certain members of a musical comedy *troupe* known as the London Belles,

his grieved relations might have been less ready to take a hand in the regulation of his affairs. But with true British stoicism Hubert let matters take their course, as they quickly did,—and much to that young man's satisfaction, as it happened.

And Hubert,—well! he was one of the many tall, well-knit, ruddy-skinned, grey-eyed, decently-bred, breezily-mannered young men who stand out clearly and cleanly in a Continental crowd, and for whose benefit the tactful waiter instinctively makes an effort at translating the *menu* into English.

In his eyes there may have lurked something that was very strong and definite, but his well-shaped mouth smiled often and genially, and the perfection of his teeth was only one among many proofs of his physical soundness.

Manifestly, the boy's education demanded completion, and since the Ox-

ford dons could scarcely be expected to recommend their ex-pupil to any other university, Hubert's assembled family soon agreed that the logical solution of the problem was to be found in a protracted stay on the Continent.

"Why not ask Rufus to give the boy a berth in one of the embassies?" Hubert's father asked his wife. The Honourable Jasper Aldringham's brother, Sir Rufus, was the head of the British Foreign Office.

"The very thing!" the good lady exclaimed with relief, and Hubert's elder sister Henrietta added her own approval of the suggestion.

"And then poor Bertie will not be obliged to live among horrid foreigners—and besides he will have the advantage of good associates." Henrietta's impressions of foreign embassies had not been formed by actual experience. They were drawn from pictures she had

seen in the illustrated weeklies, depicting tall and dignified men in court dress, in melancholy attendance at some Continental coronation, or the state funerals of departed sovereigns.

Hubert knew better; but when he was summoned from the tennis-court and told of the decision of his fond family he did not allow his rising spirits to get the better of his boyish poise. He merely gave his mother a dutiful peck on the cheek, nodded assent to his father, and went bounding back to finish his set.

Three years on the Continent! The sentence that rang in Hubert's ears was not at all appalling!

Nor did he feel he had quite finished with the good things of life when the Honourable Jasper returned from London two days later with the news that Hubert was to proceed at once to the Balkan State of Sardalia, there to

take up his post as attaché of Her Majesty's legation.

Hubert packed somewhat feverishly,—what youngster of one-and-twenty would not, at such a prospect? And the week was not spent before he found himself impatiently pacing the deck of a bobbing Channel boat bound for Calais, his thoughts intent upon the unknown future that the great world-forces, from the beginning of time, had shaped for him. He felt, with all the vague premonitions of the young, that somewhere, in the far-off foreign land whither he was hurrying, there awaited many things that were yet—and ever would be—unknown even to the fascinating *artistes* of the London Belles. Hubert, it will be noted, was on the threshold of his real education.

It was a gala day in Sardalia,—Hubert thought it a beastly bore. He had

been but a few weeks in the semi-Oriental capitol of Sofkarest and was already convinced that the pleasures of his new life—and they already promised to be many—were too much broken in upon by the pressure of official duties. Let the good Sardalian subjects make merry if they wished,—the marriage of the Princess Marie to the Grand Duke Peter meant nothing to him but an interminable week of balls and state-banquets, to be ended only with the ridiculous pageant of the ceremony itself, which Hubert and his English fellow-sufferers must attend in all the silly trappings of knee breeches, swords and the like.

“A bally lot of dashed mediæval nonsense!” Hubert complained to Captain Christopher Grenville, the British military attaché, as the two entered their chambers. They were just returning home from a ball, resplendent in their gold-laced uniforms.

"Oh! Bertie, it's all a part of the game, you know," the guardsman answered. "These foreign berths aren't half bad. Come, old chap, have to take the lean with the fat. Can't have a rippin' time every minute. Old Lady pays us for doin' a little work now and then," and her Majesty's man-of-arms settled himself comfortably in a great leather chair.

"Yes, yes, I know," Hubert answered impatiently. "But all this semi-barbaric rot gets on my nerves. Why, I feel half the time as if I were taking the juvenile part in a comic opera. Look at these rags! By George! I not only feel, but I look the fool in them."

Captain Grenville laughed.

"You'll soon get used to them, Bertie, my boy," he said.

"And these stupid royal parties," Hubert went on. "Here we are, spending every night dawdling with a lot of be-

nighted, half-addled puppets, and in the daytime we do nothing but continually change our clothes. And the women! Heaven help them! They're the most uninteresting lot of dusky beauties this side Kaffirland, I do believe."

"S-st!" the Captain warned him. "Careful! old chap—easy, now! Can't say quite everything we think, on these missions. You'd start a pretty row if anybody happened to overhear you." He rose and closed the door.

"Oh, well!" and Hubert sighed with resignation—"You know it's all true, Grenville,—what I say. These noble-women are impossible."

"I thought so," Captain Grenville said, and nodded his head with the very knowing air of a man still young. "I see where the rub is, Bertie. You're comparing 'em all with little Nannette and her friends of the Royal Opera Company, whom you met last week. Didn't

hear any complaints from you last—er—Sunday evening, for instance.”

“You misunderstand me, Grenville,” Hubert said, with some displeasure. “I don’t expect the ladies of King Nikola’s Court to be of exactly the same sort as the performers in the Royal Opera *troupe*—but confound it! man—they’re a thousand years back in the dark ages—intellectually. Now, I want a woman to be progressive—up with the times! No good at conversation—any of these girls I’ve seen! Why, I haven’t found one who ever saw a copy of *Punch*—let alone the *Pink ’Un*.

Grenville laughed at Hubert’s complaint.

“You haven’t seen ’em all yet, Hubert,” he said. “Don’t be in a hurry. You’re peevish to-night because we had to postpone that little dinner at the *Café de l’Europe*. But sooner or later one of these dark-eyed beauties will penetrate

your cardiac armament and then you'll see what a milk-and-watery, tea-and-toasty sort your Royal Opera and London music-hall girls really are. Why, my boy! slumbering behind some of these pairs of dark eyes burns a fire that has been smouldering since the days when the Huns came swarming over this part of the world. Once fan it into flame and you'll start a conflagration that'll keep you busier than you've ever been, and you'll be mighty fortunate if you don't get jolly well burnt!"

"Rats!" Hubert answered.

"Fact!" the Captain said, conclusively. "And never, never, old man, do you go poaching in this half-savage country. 'Scratch a Russian,' you know, 'and you'll find a Tartar.'"

"Well?" Hubert looked at him inquiringly.

"Here it's a case of scratching a Tartar—and you'll find a devil."

"How old are you, Grenville?" Hubert asked him.

"Six-and-twenty," the Captain answered, with some surprise.

"Well! you sound like six-and-sixty. You talk like an old woman."

"Hubert," the Captain said, with great seriousness, "take a bit of advice. I'm not much older than you, but I've been knocking about this Balkan country for some time. If you ever gave serious offence to one of these hot-headed chaps in this little land—paid a bit too marked attention to his wife, or his fiancée, or his mistress, the beggar would as soon shoot or stick you as he would a blooming wild-pig. Remember! you're not long away from the most law-abiding country in the world—where they hate a scandal like poison, and at the worst the courts are the nastiest thing you can land in. But here, unless you're very circumspect,—well, they might take the trouble to

wrap a green sheep-skin around you before they threw you into the ditch—but you wouldn't care whether they did, or whether they didn't. It'd be all the same to you."

"What the deuce are you driving at, Grenville?" Hubert asked impatiently.

"Well! you see—you'd be so dead you wouldn't mind," the Captain explained reassuringly.

"Pleasant picture you paint—of Nature's nobleman, the Sardalian!" Hubert grunted.

"Yes—but it's true. For the Lord's sake, Hubert, remember this. I've meant to tell you before. Now you're warned and I've done my duty."

"Thanks! old chap," said Hubert lightly. "No such exciting obituary will ever be written at the end of my chapter. I've not seen a single bit of femininity in a whole month in Sardalia that'd put me securely among the im-

mortals in precisely the way you insinuate." And then he exclaimed suddenly, "Oh! I say, Grenville, there was one stunning girl at the ball to-night."

"Oh, ho! You have seen *one* then?" Captain Grenville retorted.

Hubert ignored the bantering thrust.

"That girl all in black—she came in very late. I didn't meet her. Did you notice her eyes?" He stopped and for an instant looked searchingly at his companion. "Grenville!" he exclaimed—"they were the sort you just described. No—not dark—not black—some curious color—green perhaps, but by the Gods! back of 'em was something—that burned—something to make a man remember!"

Captain Grenville helped himself to a Scotch-and-soda. "Yes," he said drily, as he took a sip. "Have a drink, Bertie. Help you to forget, maybe. No good your remembering those eyes—no good my remembering them—no use any-

body's taking any interest in that particular pair! That is—anybody except Prince Stefan."

"The Crown Prince!" Hubert exclaimed.

"Yes. Sorry old chap! Awfully sorry!—but so far as the lady with the emerald orbs is concerned you're just a bit out of the running. Crown Prince saw her first, Bertie."

"But she's not—" Hubert began hotly, and then stopped short.

"Bless you, no—not that! But she is the Grand Duchess Sonia of Russia. The—er—the marriage has already been arranged."

"Not with that rotter!" cried Hubert, with loathing.

"Since we're alone here," said Grenville, glancing at the door, "yes—if you're pleased to put it that way."

"I say! It's a damned outrage, to tie a girl like her to a creature like him.

Why, the fellow hasn't a trace of decency about him."

"The old story, Hubert! Political reasons, of course. You see the Czar is particularly anxious for a permanent alliance with Sardalia. He first tried—as the story goes—to marry our amiable friend Prince Stefan to the Grànd Duchess Alexandrine—very unattractive lady they say, with the temper of a shrew. The Crown Prince made a pilgrimage to St. Petersburg to have a look at his proposed spouse and while he was there caught a glimpse of her cousin—the girl you saw to-night. He specified the cousin or nothing. Knew the Czar was keen for an alliance. Prince Stefan isn't a fool, you know. The girl objected and the Czar himself was furious at the prospect of a bally Balkan Prince taking the pick of the Empire. He hesitated, until Stefan went to Vienna and openly danced attendance upon the

Princess Irene of Austria,—a little ruse which soon brought his neighbour the Czar to terms.”

“Gad! It’s a rotten crime, Grenville! Think of a nice girl being married to that drunken brute!” Hubert was indignant.

“Fortunes of war—or of peace, rather,” the Captain answered. “The girl kicked against the pricks, they say, but the Little Father soon put a stop to that. Here she is, arrived only last evening, to get acquainted with her future family.”

“And a nice crowd they are!” cried Hubert—“in-bred, vicious, brutal—not a vestige of decency among the whole pack of ’em! By Jove! Grenville, these Continental state marriages are enough to sicken an Anglo-Saxon. Thank the Lord, our English women are not bartered like so many cattle,” and Hubert crossed to the table to find a match.

"Hello! Letters!" and he picked up a handful of mail that he found lying on a tray. "All yours!—no here's one for me—ah! and another—"

"Mine'll keep till morning," said Captain Grenville, indolently. "Found something?" he asked, as Hubert tore open one of the envelopes and stood reading it with interest.

"From the divine Nannette," Hubert answered, with a smile. "Says she's giving a very small supper to-morrow night. Wants you to come along, too. We'll go, of course?"

"Can't," said the Captain. "You forget the party at the hunting-lodge."

"Damn the house-party!" Hubert exclaimed fervently. "Send regrets—impossible to arrive until the following morning,—official business—that sort of rot!"

"Don't be a blooming ass, Bertie. There'll be plenty more of these little

suppers. You've accepted the other invitation already, you know. Mustn't withdraw now—bad form, shockingly bad form. Have to do some work for your country besides. If you're bored too much, you can perk up your spirits now and then by—a look into those marvellous eyes of the future Queen of Sardalia."

"The future Queen of Sardalia," Hubert repeated slowly. "I had forgotten. She'll be there, of course. Well, Grenville—for once I'll take your advice. And for once the charming Nannette will have to forego the pleasure of my distinguished company." He sat down at the desk and quickly wrote a few lines of regret. "There—poor girl!" he said as he finished. "Sorry not to give you a treat to-morrow night—but I cannot fail my country in her hour of need." He rang a bell, and to the man who came quickly to his summons—"Here," he

said,—“send this out to-morrow morning.”

Captain Grenville looked at his watch.

“I’m turning in now. You’d better, too. It’s late—two o’clock. ’Night, Bertie, and pleasant dreams!”

“’Night, Grenville!” said Hubert.

At the doorway the Captain paused for a moment, and looked thoughtfully at the younger man.

“Oh! By the way,” he added, “if you must dream of eyes, take an old woman’s advice and stick to the Grand Opera variety.” And then the draperies closed behind him.

“Good God!” said Hubert, to himself. For, after all, he was very young.

CHAPTER II

THE door swung open sharply—the door of the trophy-room in the royal hunting-lodge—and a man strode rudely in, followed by a woman.

It was characteristic of Prince Stefan that he should enter before his companion, for the Crown Prince of Sardalia was noted for other characteristics than gentle manners.

"My dear," he said, seating himself on the wide seat in front of the open fire, "here we can talk without interruption."

"There's very little to be said," answered the girl. She remained standing, and as she looked around at the weapon-lined room, with its great heads of boar and bear that grinned upon her

from every wall, their sinister tusks gleaming in the firelight, she shivered slightly and moved nearer to the hearth.

The Prince looked at her deliberately, appraisingly, as one might regard some chattel he had purchased. And there was more than approval in his glance.

"On the contrary," he continued, with something suggestive of a sneer, "there are a few points that we may as well discuss now, once and for all."

She shrugged her shoulders in a quaint foreign fashion, as if to indicate her resignation.

"Well?" she asked him, coldly.

"The Premier tells me that your visit to Sardalia at this time is not exactly—well—volitional—on your part. In other words, had it not been for our very dear friend the Czar we should have been obliged to forego the pleasure of your presence during these gala days."

"It is fortunate, perhaps, that you un-

derstand the situation so clearly," the Grand Duchess answered. "Though, to be quite frank, you have put the case rather too delicately."

The Crown Prince smiled broadly.

"I'm not often accused of over-nicety of speech," he observed.

"So I am aware," she told him, "nor is my intense dislike of you based solely upon those grounds."

Prince Stefan shot a quick look at her.

"Oh!" she said, "we'll not mince matters—you and I. You insist on this hateful marriage. Well! since I must obey—remember that I am a Russian. I do this thing because my country demands it of me. Just what is needed of me—no more—do I give. Thank God the exigencies of the case do not require that in private I need show toward you even the slightest vestige of a respect which I am far from feeling!"

But her cutting words bore no offence to the Crown Prince. The armour of his insolent indifference was proof positive against even this open insult.

"Charming! charming! my dear," he cried. "Do you know that when you defy me like this you are more irresistible than ever? Come!" he said, "I like your spirit. It is a family trait—I believe. Your cousin Alexandrine has her share of it too—but not coupled with certain other graces in which you are more favoured. Yes, you have the fire of the Cossacks.

The Grand Duchess Sonia looked haughtily at her future husband.

"Take care," she admonished, "that you do not provoke me too much."

"Ah!" he rejoined, "I've known Russian women before."

"I dare say—and to their sorrow," she interrupted.

"Oh! well. A woman's like a high-

spirited horse. For a time her capers are amusing. And when she overdoes the thing, there's always the spur, and the curb and—the whip—to bring her to her senses. Give her a good taste of the right medicine and she'll play prettily for ever after."

"Your women must have come from low-bred stock, Stefan," the Grand Duchess said fiercely—"yes, and your horses, too. These sheep-like mountain ponies in your country are of a different strain from our Russian Orloffs. Your low tastes show in both—"

"Both?" asked the Prince.

"Horses—and women, too," she answered.

"Ha! you too, then,—since you insist. I may not dispute a guest," Prince Stefan sneered.

"No—the Sardalian code, I suppose! You may not dispute him, but you may stab him—in the back."

"Have a care, my fine lady," the Prince exclaimed, stung at last.

"Oh!" the girl cried, "you cannot frighten me with your threats. Your pretty dolls that you amuse yourself with may cower before you—but you'll find me made of different stuff. When you're in your senses you know that swift reprisal that Czar would take if you ever—" and she stopped, as Stefan sprang to his feet and looked at her menacingly.

"Ever—what?" he demanded. "We'll have no half-spoken riddles."

"Oh! I've heard of your women with marks of the whip lacing their backs—"

"You lie!" he shouted.

"Yes—and the girl who was found with the print of fingers upon her throat!"

The Crown Prince crossed quickly to the girl's side and seized her shoulder with one of his cruel hands.

"Stop!" he cried, "or I'll—"

"I beg your pardon," said an English voice, and Stefan's threat was never finished.

He released his hold upon his companion's shoulder and drew away from her a step.

"What is it?" he asked thickly, as he scowled at the newcomer.

"I was looking for the trophy-room—this is it, I see," said Hubert. "Captain Grenville asked me to meet him here. If—if I am intruding—" and he hesitated, as he stood in the doorway, looking inquiringly at the couple in the fire-light.

"By no means," said the girl, graciously, before her companion could answer. "Come in—we—we were merely talking."

The Crown Prince turned upon her angrily, but she silenced him with a covert gesture.

Hubert Aldringham was sure that as he had approached the trophy-room he

had heard the high voice of a man, and the quieter tones of a woman—this glorious girl with amazing eyes.

“Grenville? Who’s he?” Prince Stefan asked Hubert insolently.

“One of the Crown Prince’s guests,” Hubert answered quietly, but he did not remove the gaze from the woman standing by the fire. “Captain Grenville, of the British legation.”

“Oh, I thought for a moment—of the Royal Opera Company,” the Prince said, with a meaning look. “Well, sir—I take it you are of the same service—Her Majesty’s I mean. Don’t let us interrupt your *tête-à-tête*. You have many interesting things to discuss, I dare say.”

And with a slightly ironic bow, he walked to the door.

The girl stood for a moment, returning Hubert’s intent gaze. Full into his eyes she looked, and it was as if she had completely forgotten her royal partner.

"Well!" said Stefan, with a sardonic smile, and with lowered lids she crossed the room. And there was something in her bearing that proclaimed her every inch a queen. Hubert marked it well—it was a moment he never forgot, to his dying day.

And even the Crown Prince, dog that he was, for the first time knew her for his mistress.

This time he stood aside, while the girl passed him as if he were a thing of wood, and crossed the threshold. And Prince Stefan, without a glance at Hubert, followed.

When, a moment later, Captain Grenville sauntered into the room he found Hubert staring thoughtfully into the fire.

"Oh! There you are, Bertiel" the Captain exclaimed, "been talking to the girl with the green eyes, eh? But under

an excellent chaperon, my boy! Just met 'em in the hall outside. 'Is Royal 'Ighness seemed a bit glum, I thought."

"His Royal Highness?"

"Yes—he must have been here only a moment ago, with the Grand Duchess Sonia."

"The damned bounder!" Hubert growled. "What do you think, Grenville—I stumbled on a curious bit of lovemaking just now. As I came in here, I heard a very good imitation of a Crown Prince in a pet, to put it mildly. Should say he wasn't a bit pleasant when he loses his temper, and by Jove! he'd laid a rough hand on that girl's arm—looked as if he was going to put the other on her throat!"

"Hubert! You're mistaken. You don't know the impetuous billing and cooing of the East."

"No—thank God!" said Hubert, fervently. "I don't. But it wasn't that."

Prince Stefan was in a very different sort of humour—in a very nasty temper, to say the least.”

“Tut! tut! Nothing of the sort, my boy. Why, man! I believe you’re jealous!” And the Captain laughed at the indignant youngster.

“Don’t be a fool, Grenville,” said Hubert, testily. “Give me credit for knowing a snarling cur when I see one, and a dangerous one, too. I’d have backed out and not interrupted the love-scene—had it been that. But it was too evident that that scoundrel was bullying the girl—yes—was abusing that wonderful creature. You should have seen him jump aside when I spoke.”

“This story goes no further—of course—” was the Captain’s half-interrogatory comment.

“Naturally—I’ve some sense, Grenville—it stops right here with you and me. But I say, old chap!—His Royal

Highness doesn't seem to care for you especially."

"How's that?" the Captain asked.

"Gave you a dig about the Opera crowd. I'd told him, you see, that I was to meet you here."

"Ha! ha! Our friend the Crown Prince resents any foreign invasion into what he has always considered his private preserve. He jolly well knows that he's not popular in that particular quarter—in fact some of the *artistes* flatly refused to return to Sofkarest for this season unless the King curbed his first-born's activities in that direction."

"But why does he dislike you?" Hubert asked.

"Oh! trust the Prince for knowing all the talky-talk in the whole Capital. His precious friends—headed by that cut-throat Lieutenant Petkoff, retail all the gossip that goes the rounds in Sofkarest, and you can depend upon it, among

his intimates it loses nothing in the telling. You can't go to one of those little suppers without Prince Stefan's knowing that you were one of the party."

"What's it to him?" Hubert inquired.

"Oh! he's jealous, and lays it up against you, unless you're one of his set."

"And twits you about it when it's most uncomfortable for you," Hubert said indignantly.

"What! did he tread on your toes too, Bertie?"

"Well—er—he insinuated—that, being a friend of yours, I was not altogether free from contamination," Hubert replied.

"Needn't be so nasty about it, Bertie. You've done very well in this short time—thanks to my help—to get yourself so specially noticed by the heir to the Sardinian throne."

"Oh! quit your ragging—Grenville. Much I care about the fellow's jibes!—

if only he'd choose a more suitable time for 'em. But before the Grand Duchess Sonia—hang it, man! that's the only introduction I've had to the girl. Deuced uncomfortable for me! No doubt she thinks me just another rotter like the Crown Prince."

"So that's where the shoe pinches, is it? Cheer up, old boy! Don't worry about that. That's the least you have to trouble you. Your acquaintance with the lady will never progress far enough for her to recall where she first saw you, nor under what circumstances."

"But, here we are, guests at this house-party—" Hubert began.

"A mere matter of form, Hubert," the Captain interrupted. "Just a bit of bluff, as the Americans say. They try to bluff you by inviting you, and you try to bluff them by coming. Doesn't get either side anywhere, but it is supposed to contribute to the general *entente*

cordiale of the Powers, and incidentally adds to the gaiety of nations."

"I've noticed," said Hubert thoughtfully, "that I seem to be thrown more in contact with other foreigners and their women folk, than the Sardalians."

"Of course you are. We're just rank outsiders. Not asked here because of our charming personalities, but just because it's a part of the great game of diplomacy."

"Diplomacy!" Hubert exclaimed with disgust. "I'm growing weary of the very word! What does it mean? It's only a polite term for intrigue, and trickery and deceit!"

"Bravo!" the Captain cried. "You're getting on, Bertie. You're learning! It's a wise workman that knows his own tools!—forget who said that! Honestly, old chap, I begin to have hopes of you."

Hubert looked at the Captain with troubled eyes.

"Don't talk like that!" he said. "For Heaven's sake, Grenville, don't jeer at everything decent. Here we are in this rotten hole where things are all topsy-turvy. All the ideals of honour and integrity and manliness that back home we first drank in with our mother's milk—why! they're unknown here! A man isn't a man in this corner of Europe unless he cheats and lies, unless he's ready to slip a knife under the shoulder-blade of his best friend, or betray his wife, or his daughter, or his sweetheart. God knows we Anglo-Saxons have our faults, but they're not that kind. Sometimes I can't stand it to hear you scoff and sneer and make light of the very cornerstones that England's built upon."

Captain Grenville looked curiously at the earnest boy.

"You're right, Bertie—" he said. "Forgive me! Sooner or later we chaps who are cut off from all the home things

and go knocking about in these queer foreign countries get into a cynical way of thinking. We forget—for the time being—that the whole world's not like the little corner of it that we're in. Enough of it is—the Lord knows! Does us good to have somebody like you, fresh from home, come out and bring us to our senses."

"Oh—cut it, Grenville!" Hubert hastened to say, "I didn't mean to read you a curtain lecture. I'm none too straight-laced myself, as you know. But we Englishmen mustn't forget that the good people back home expect some things of us—and—well! we shouldn't disappoint 'em too much,—that's all."

"Gad!" and the Captain started. "Nearly forgot what I wanted to see you about. That chap Von Kallay—"

"The Hungarian?"

"Yes—we were just speaking of him, weren't we? I couldn't tell you with

the others about. It's this. I wanted to warn you. Habit of the Count's, it is, to get up a table at cards at these house-parties—'long in the small hours."

"Well?" Hubert said.

"If anybody should invite you, have an excuse ready. The Austrian—Nemmers might ask you—you're new here."

"The hook-nosed chap?" Hubert asked.

"Yes. He and Von Kallay are always in these little games together. Peculiarity of theirs that they always let us out-siders into these quiet sittings and those two precious rascals manage between 'em to give the unsuspecting stranger within their gates gaming enough to last him for a long, long time."

"Ah—ha! Crooked, are they?" asked Hubert quickly.

"As they make 'em!" Captain Grenville said briefly. "They caught me

once to the tune of a quarter's income. I never tried to get it back."

"Perhaps you can pay off old scores in some other way, Grenville. These matters usually adjust themselves in time."

"Sort of poetic justice, you mean?" asked the Captain.

"Oh, I don't know. Something of the sort, maybe," Hubert said.

"No, my boy. Only way we could ever get a crack at these bandits would be for England to get lined up against 'em in some sort of international tangle. Hope to thunder we never have to fight *for* 'em, at all events. Well—I must be getting back to the billiard room. Promised a chap I'd play him a game. Come along, Bertie!" and the Captain paused in the doorway and looked at Hubert. But Hubert made no move to follow him.

"Not going to stay in this gloomy old hole, are you?"

And then, conscious that he was in the way of some one, the Captain turned, and with a bow and a murmured apology quickly moved aside.

It was the Grand Duchess Sonia.

"Pardon!" she said in a low voice, as she entered; and she regarded Hubert closely.

Captain Grenville, realising that he was unmistakably *de trop*, vanished, with every indication of amazement pictured on his usually placid countenance.

"My—my fan!" she said, "I think I left it here."

Hubert spied the jewelled bauble on the chimney-piece.

"This must be it," he told her.

"Thank you—yes," and she took from him the peacock-feathered toy.

But she still stood there, while Hubert waited, for it seemed to him that there was something more that she wished to say. The girl cast a fleeting glance

about the room, and toward the hall whence she had just come.

"Are we quite alone?" she asked, quickly.

"Quite, your Grace," Hubert answered, wondering.

"Ah!" she said, and Hubert saw that her bosom rose and fell and he knew that he was himself strangely moved. "You—you are an Englishman. And I know that you will not misconstrue my motive in coming here. This—" and she tapped the fan—"this was not the real reason. There is no necessity for subterfuge with you."

Frankly Hubert looked into her wonderful eyes.

"I trust not," he said gently.

"I have known a few of you English. You are different—certainly very different from—from the men of this country,—yes—different, too, even from the men of my own." She hesitated for a

moment, as if she hardly knew how to phrase what she wished to say. Then drawing closer to him—"You saw—a little time ago—you heard—peculiar things here, in this place." And she looked searchingly into Hubert's face as if she would read what lay behind it, ineffably traced upon his memory.

"Yes—your Grace," the young man said, and his voice was troubled. "You speak the truth, but if you fear that—that strange tales may be told—stories circulated perhaps, not exactly to the credit of His Highness the Crown Prince—"

"Yes—yes—" she broke in, impetuously. "Oh! I knew that you would understand."

"The English Captain, too, he may have guessed—"

"No—not guessed—" he started to confess, but she stopped him with an imperious gesture.

"What you have said is quite enough,"

she said simply. "I know the English ideals of honour—where women are concerned, especially. And I know that you are sponsor for yourself and for him as well. It is enough that you have told me what you have. Oh! I thank you," she said—"I thank you. Perhaps you do not quite realise what it means—but for the present it is necessary that some things shall appear, if possible, other than as they really are." She held her hand out to Hubert, and bowing over it he pressed it to his lips.

"Most gracious lady," he murmured, and his low tones gave the greater emphasis to his sincerity—"it shall be as you wish. Although I am not a Sardalian, and you are not yet a Sardalian princess, when that day comes I promise that among all your devoted subjects there'll be none more ready to serve you than I."

"Why are you so kind to me?" she

asked softly, and it was plain that she was deeply moved. "I am an utter stranger to you—and yet from the first moment that I saw you in this room I knew that you were my—friend."

Hubert still held her hand in his. A slender hand it was, with long, patrician fingers, and the loveliest of shell-pink tips. He looked down at it strangely, and yet it seemed to him that it should be his, by right, to hold for ever. A curious thought—this—to enter the head of an ordinary Englishman—that this marvellous hand of a noble Russian lady, already pledged to the heir to the Sardalian throne—should belong to him!

"Dear lady," Hubert said, at last—"I am, and more, I hope. Think of me, pray, as one whom you may always trust, come what may. And though it may never be my privilege to perform any useful office for you,—still, this is a strange world. I know you are greatly

troubled. I only wish it lay in my power to help you; but this is an idle thought, for we both know that some things are unalterable."

"Yes," the Grand Duchess answered. "Life is hard, is it not? And we are both young—you and I; but perhaps Fate has always smiled on you?"

"She has to-night," said Hubert, simply, and the brief words bore an unmistakable significance.

What mysterious power drew these two souls together? You that read may answer, if you can. I that write know as little as did Hubert or the lady of the forces that urged each on. Perhaps it is better that some things are hidden from us mortals.

Hubert did not doubt, in that moment, that at last he had met the one woman in the world of whom each man has his dream.

And the future Queen of Sardalia—

true daughter of Eve as she was—knew the man who gazed at her with the love-light in his unfaltering eyes to be her faithful servitor and her devoted knight.

For a time neither broke the silence. The great logs burning fiercely on the hearth sent their ruddy light in flickering tongues here and there about the room, now licking the cold cruel blades of the spears upon the wall, and now boldly playing about the scornful fangs of some conquered lord of the forest.

And Hubert, looking about the great room in a curious, detached fashion, felt that those savage jowls grinned mockingly upon him and the Queen of the World.

“By God! She’s mine!” The thought possessed him. And yet in his heart he knew that it could never be.

CHAPTER III

How long they stood there in that fashion Hubert never knew. Just how it all had come about he could never quite remember. But some one spoke—it was not the lady; it was not Hubert's voice that jarred the stillness of the place. With one accord they turned, and saw Prince Stefan standing in the doorway. By some strange juggling of the devil the tables had been turned. A black rage marred the Prince's brutally handsome face; and over his shoulder peered the furtive, shifting eyes of his dear friend, Lieutenant Petkoff. The Crown Prince waited, but there was no greeting for him from those two unflinching mortals.

Stefan strode into the room, followed

by his attendant. His features worked in passion and his cruel hands moved restlessly, as if the fingers itched to grasp, and crush and kill.

"A pleasant scene!" he snarled. "A charming picture, by my faith! Come!—you," he said, pointing to Hubert, "you shall be rewarded.—What can I do for him?" he sneered, turning to the Lieutenant.

"He'd make an excellent Master of the Bed-chamber," that worthy suggested with a meaning smile.

"Stop!" cried Hubert—"I'll have none of your insults—no! nor yours, either!" he added, wheeling upon Stefan.

That precious scion of royalty retreated instinctively, for there was a steely ring in Hubert's voice that showed the mettle of the man.

But the Prince quickly regained his accustomed coolness. Ignoring Hubert as if he were unworthy of his notice, he

bent his wicked, snapping eyes upon the girl.

"So this, madam, is the way you conduct yourself in my house! I am glad to have been kept in the dark so short a time. It is well that we should understand each other. It is plain that I am not the only person of royal blood who exercises the right of choosing where he will. I have heard much of your accomplishments but it seems that my information was incomplete."

Enraged beyond endurance, Hubert started toward the Prince, but the Grand Duchess stepped quickly between him and his royal adversary. For her woman's intuition told her that Prince Stefan was deliberately trying, by means of an open quarrel, to provoke the incensed boy to some rash action.

"Enough of this nonsense!" she said sharply. "You know perfectly well, Stefan, that your base insinuations are

sheer bravado. I should be interested to see how you would conduct yourself without a hired bully at your shoulder," and she looked at Lieutenant Petkoff with unutterable contempt.

"Save your heroics!" she continued. "You may need them on some other occasion. They can serve no purpose here."

Prince Stefan saw that it was useless to press the quarrel further.

"There'll be ample time to sift this matter," he affirmed. "And as for you, sir," he said, turning to Hubert, "let me see no more of you, upon this occasion or upon any other, than you can help."

Hubert smiled pleasantly at the anticlimax.

"You may be sure," he said, "that I shall never seek your society voluntarily. It is quite evident that your tastes and mine are too much at variance ever to permit us to be congenial companions.

You need have no fear on that score, your Highness."

The Prince looked at Hubert darkly.

"We'll end this fruitless discussion," he said. "After all, words are futile. And since actions count for more, and you can easily see that your presence in this room is no longer agreeable to any one concerned, have the goodness to withdraw at once."

"With pleasure," said Hubert, and he offered his arm to the Grand Duchess, for he had no mind to leave the girl to the tender care of two such blackguards.

"Stop!" cried the Prince. "Damn your impudence—you shall smart for this conduct, I promise you." He seemed about to strike at Hubert; and Petkoff's hand crept cunningly to his side, for the villain scented trouble. He had a reputation for being as quick with the dagger as with the pistol.

"Bah!" the Grand Duchess said.

"You dare not!" and with a contemptuous stare at the two she placed her hand on Hubert's arm and they left the room together.

"If he'd made a move at you, I'd have had the steel in him before he knew what happened," the Lieutenant said regretfully, turning to the Crown Prince.

"What!" Stefan cried. "Soil your pretty knife on carrion like that! You're too good for such common work, Michael. We'll set Catargo upon this dog's trail and as soon as he finds the slightest opportunity he'll do for him in short order. Some dark night our English friend will spend a few hours lying upon his back with those languishing eyes turned up to the heavens. But there'll be one dawn he'll never see. No, nor ever after!" He strode restlessly back and forth across the floor. But Lieutenant Petkoff was of a gayer temperament.

"Well! well! Let's forget him for a

while—since we're to do nothing now," he said. "A drink of brandy would do you a world of good, Stefan, and as for me, I'm sure I should perish soon for want of it."

"Ring the bell, then," said the Prince. "No need for me to tell *you* where it is. You always know by instinct where to find a bell-cord that will bring you liquor."

Petkoff laughed easily as he crossed the room and pulled a tasselled silken rope.

"What a quantity of useful faculties I possess!" he retorted. "This is only one of the many qualifications that make me an ideal companion for a true prince of the blood." It was clear that the fellow stood in no great awe of his patron. The Lieutenant gave his orders to the lackey who promptly answered the summons and soon returned bearing a decanter and glasses.

The man quickly filled a glass for each. Petkoff stretched out a hand to take his portion and it was already near his lips when his royal master stopped him.

"We'll drink a toast to-night," he said, significantly—"not a *health*, exactly." And he smiled grimly. "Success to Caltargo! And may he strike true!"

CHAPTER IV

IT was six days after Hubert's *contre-temps* with the Crown Prince Stefan. . . . And Dame Rumour's tongue as ever, had been wagging. That ubiquitous and famous old lady's whisperings had reached more than one ear in the Capital—though neither Hubert nor Captain Grenville, nor (needless to say) the Grand Duchess Sonia, had breathed a word of what passed at the hunting-lodge upon that fateful night. But it must be remembered that wine—especially the Sardalian vintages—is a wonderful stimulus to conversation, and Prince Stefan, as everybody knew, was always talkative when in his cups.

More than once the premature announcement of the Crown Prince's es-

capades had caused them to be nipped in the bud.

Frustrating Prince Stefan's mad plans was only one of the many ways in which Baron Sarafoff, the Prime Minister, had made himself indispensable to his sovereign. And when the crafty old statesman's secret agents came to him with tales of Stefan's threats against Hubert Aldringham, the young attaché of the British legation, the Baron at once set about curbing the aspirations of the hope of Sardalia. For he knew well the lengths to which the Crown Prince might go.

The mere spilling of blood, and a throat or two slit now and then, were sometimes all in the day's work. And Baron Sarafoff never permitted such trifles to interfere with his enjoyment of a good dinner. Nor did the recollection of such things ever come crowding inopportunely upon the old man to disturb

his devotions. The Baron was an Eastern statesman *par excellence*.

But an unpleasant entanglement with Great Britain—ah! that was another matter—a contingency which must unquestionably be averted. And Prince Stefan found the old gentleman in no easy frame of mind when at the Baron's request they met in the palace by appointment.

When the Crown Prince entered the audience-chamber, having purposely allowed his elder mentor to wait there for a quarter of an hour, he found the Premier in no agreeable humour. While the old statesman's heels had been cooling, his displeasure was only growing more heated.

"Well, Sire!" the Prime Minister said testily, "now that you have at last had the grace to respond to my appeal I will not keep you in the dark as to the nature of my business. The topic that I came here to discuss with you is one that may

not prove any too pleasant. But you will remember that my views upon it have the sanction of His Majesty."

"Yes! yes!" the Prince interrupted. "Pray come to the point at once."

"The young Englishman, Aldringham—it is he of whom I wish to speak," and Baron Sarafoff looked narrowly at the Crown Prince.

Stefan flushed hotly.

"Who's been tale-bearing? Ah! One of your accursed spies, of course. Really, sir, this is becoming unbearable. It is preposterous that a prince of the realm should be subjected to espionage. I shall bring this matter before His Majesty. How dare you set your creatures to watch me?"

"We will not waste time in futile discussion," Baron Sarafoff told him. "So long as your conduct shows no improvement—until you realise your responsibilities as heir-apparent, just so long shall

we be obliged to impose some restraint upon you. I am sure I have often told you this." And with an impatient wave of the hand, as if to dismiss the Crown Prince's complaint as a matter not worthy of further consideration, he said, bluntly, "I learn on excellent authority that you have given that pretty rascal Catargo *carte blanche* to put this Englishman out of your way."

Prince Stefan sneered openly.

"I had not thought it would disturb your conscience," he said, with a meaning smile.

But the Baron was too old a diplomat to allow himself to be baited by one of the Crown Prince's years. He ignored the thrust, as one beneath his notice.

"Is it possible," he continued, "that you have not given thought to the consequences of such a deed? Is all the training that I have lavished on you utterly in vain? Have I not for years—ever since

you were a mere boy—pointed out to you upon what a slender thread the peace of Europe hangs?”

“Only a lot of old women’s whims!” Stefan cried impatiently. “My father and you and all the other sovereigns and ministers of the Balkans have been weighed down for years by this incubus of a general war. I tell you, it is only a ruse—a political game in which you have allowed yourselves to be tricked for generations. I’ve heard enough of it. Defy the Powers and they’ll slink away like the bullies they are. Let this foreign dog Aldringham to be the first to sample the true temper of Sardalia!”

While he talked the Prince strode quickly up and down the chamber, and as he finished he stopped before the grizzled old watch-dog Sarafoff and struck savagely at the heavy oaken table upon which the Baron’s hand rested.

"Be seated!" And the Baron pointed to a chair at Stefan's side. And drawing up another for himself, he sat down and the two faced each other across the table. "Stefan!" he said, "you are making a fatal mistake. You betray upon what insecure foundations your statesmanship is grounded. Possibly you are not aware of it yourself, but it is only too apparent to me that you are confusing issues. Come! how much thought have you given until now, to the phase of the Powers as concerns this matter of that young English attaché? You do not answer. And why? Because you know in your heart that in this whole business you are moved by a purely personal animus. No! Don't deny it!" he said quickly, as Prince Stefan started to object. "It is possible that you may deceive yourself, but you cannot deceive me. Ah! Once I, too, was young and hot-headed. I have not forgotten the ways of

youth." His voice took on a softer, a more sympathetic tone, and as he watched the effect of his words upon the Prince he saw that the younger man was visibly mollified. Baron Sarafoff's success in his chosen profession of statesman was far from being a matter of accident. In all Eastern Europe there was not a more astute judge of human nature.

"My son," the Premier continued, "we must never confuse affairs of state with affairs of the individual. More than one monarch has owed his undoing to that mistake. Remember, even the great Napoleon serves as a warning to us all. Tell me," he said, and there was a world of solicitude in his manner, "in just what way has this Englishman displeased you? It is possible that we may deal with him in some fashion that may be quite sufficient to the requirements of his case, and yet not involve ourselves in unnecessary complications. Tell me the

whole story. My best offices are, as always, at your command."

Prince Stefan's mercurial temper responded quickly to the Prime Minister's adroit handling.

"The impudent dog has come between me and Sonia," he said darkly.

"So?" The Baron's eyebrows lifted high, and his lips pursed themselves, as he feigned a surprise he did not feel.

"All Sofkarest is ringing with the gossip!" Stefan exclaimed. "Wherever I go, I see nods and smiles and hear the buzzing of wagging tongues. I tell you, I'll not endure it! For a week now, ever since they met at the lodge, those two have been making covert love to each other."

"The Englishman, perhaps, yes," said the Baron thoughtfully. "Those Britishers are quixotic fools, I know, and capable of much madness. But the Grand Duchess Sonia—no! I cannot be-

lieve it of her. Come, Stefan! you know women as well as I do. The girl was piqued by your attitude toward her. I've been told she'd been somewhat spoiled by too much attention in Petersburg. She saw that this young fool was infatuated with her, and is only amusing herself at his expense, knowing that it would annoy you, and hoping that it would bring you abjectly to her feet."

"I had not thought of that," Prince Stefan answered musingly.

"No? But it is the only logical solution. Set your mind at rest on that score. You need not worry about the girl's part in the affair. But the man—ah! we must find some way of spiking his guns."

"Catargo can attend to that better than any one else!" the Crown Prince cried. "The damned, intruding upstart! How dare he make love to her! I tell you, death is only too good for him!" And

Prince Stefan showed marked signs of a return of his violent passion.

"Softly! softly! That is impossible, as we have already decided," Baron Saraf-off hastened to say. "That is, for the present. There is, however, not the slightest objection to entering his name upon that select list of gentry whose cases are to be attended to more thoroughly when the opportunity offers. But meanwhile we will content ourselves with—let us say, humiliating the fellow. We'll discredit him with his superiors and rid Sardalia of his obnoxious presence."

"Well?" Stefan inquired, at length. "Perhaps you have some scheme in mind, since my own does not meet with your approval," he added, drily.

"In general, yes, I have," the Premier replied. "The details we will work out together. Our best plan of attack will be of course—"

"Through a woman!" Prince Stefan exclaimed.

The older man laughed. "You've not forgotten your Virgil, I see," he said, "at least the human nature of it. '*Dux femina facit!*' Yes, my boy, you are right. Come—when you bend your mind to it you show a real aptitude for diplomacy."

The Crown Prince was quite evidently flattered by the compliment.

"Oh! men are alike the world over," he said,—“always ready to follow the trail of a petticoat. But this chap's devoted to the Grand Duchess. We'd have hard work decoying him away."

"Humph!" the Baron grunted. "The part he will play in the affair may be innocent enough. Let us catch this Al-dringham and some trollop alone together—let us come upon them suddenly and we can create enough of a situation. What one of your little friends can we trust—so far as we must?"

"The Hungarian, Mitzi. She's clever, and—"

"And quite devoted to the welfare of the reigning house, eh?" the Baron interrupted. "Well, if you're sure of her—suppose we arrange a *tête-à-tête* between her and this attaché, for to-morrow night, let us say. There's the ball at the Summer Palace and our man will be there. Have the woman in one of the lodges—she'll be quite at home there, I've no doubt—and we'll trick Aldringham into meeting her in the Palace along in the small hours."

Prince Stefan jumped to his feet in great glee.

"Bravo!" he cried, and slapped his royal sire's Premier on his military back. "The very thing! And we'll catch them together. But how can we get the fellow to meet her?"

"A note!" the old fox explained.

"Here, I'll write it now and you get the girl to copy it."

"And I'll destroy the original," the Prince said.

"No, return it to me. It will make a pretty souvenir." Baron Sarafoff was too experienced a strategist to trust the burning of a letter to any but himself.

There were writing materials at one end of the great table, and the old Premier helped himself to a sheet of paper. Seating himself at the table again, he wrote rapidly, while Prince Stefan watched him with a smile of interest and anticipation.

"Now," the Baron said, at last, with an air of finality, "this, I think, will do the trick for us." And he read to his royal listener the following words:

"I have information that is of the utmost importance to you. Unless I can speak to you before to-morrow, it will be too late. All

the evening I have tried in vain to talk with you alone, even for a moment. And now I dare not delay longer. By all that you hold most dear, do not fail to meet me—in the little breakfast-room—at four o'clock. The whole palace will be asleep then. Tell the bearer of this note that you will heed this appeal from one who would serve you, but dares not sign her name.' ”

While the Premier's deep voice droned through the short sentences, the Crown Prince listened attentively, nodding now and again his approval of the composition.

“Bravo!” he cried, when the old rascal had finished. “Most excellently done, my good Baron! Truly, I understand more and more my father's high esteem for you.”

“This can hardly fail to fetch him,” Sarafoff said, thoughtfully. “The fellow will think, of course, that it is one of the guests who wishes to speak with him. An

older man, your Highness, would scarcely be hoodwinked by as clumsy a piece of deception as this. But why waste our talent where it is not needed? This Englishman—he is young, impetuous. He has not the caution that comes only with years. A mysterious message from a lady! And one who wishes to help him! What youngster could withstand a so romantic appeal?”

“Not this fatuous coxcomb, by my faith!” the Prince answered, in great glee. “He’s as good as caught in the trap already. I can see his face now, when we come upon him . . . I have it!” he exclaimed suddenly. “We’ll let no one into the secret except Petkoff. I’ll have him arrange a boar-hunt for the morning after the ball. An early start, you know! We’ll all meet in the gun-room just before sunrise, a dozen of us—a few good Sardalians, and some foreigners, too. Then to the breakfast-room at four o’clock

for coffee—and there'll be witnesses galore to discover our dainty Englishman alone with the beautiful Mitzi. God! what a play it will be. You'll not miss it?"

Baron Sarafoff shook his head, as he smiled at the enthusiasm of his royal pupil.

"That part I leave all in your good hands," he said. "Late hours do not suit late years, my boy. But there must be no violence, mind! You young hot-heads must not over-play your parts—you and Petkoff. Remember! if there are witnesses against Aldringham—so also would there be against you, if any harm befell the Englishman."

All shall be as you wish it," the Prince assured him. "To kill the upstart—that would spoil the comedy. No, be assured, my dear Baron, that this Aldringham will live to appreciate to the full the subtlety of your little joke," and the Crown Prince

laughed immoderately. Stefan's sense of humour was of a practical sort. As a boy he had made his tutors' lives miserable by his vicious pranks, and had teased and bullied his playmates mercilessly. The Premier's plan for disposing of Hubert was one the very nature of which could not fail to appeal to the young Prince. Indeed the Baron had had the Prince's weaknesses carefully in mind when he formulated his plan. The old juggler of Sardalian state-matters always suited his legerdemain to his audience. He knew that the likeliest way of circumventing Prince Stefan was to divert him. But it was a very bland and guileless smile that the Baron bestowed upon his royal master's graceless offspring as he said:

"See, now, what a little co-operation can do. One young head and one old one are always better than either alone. Only bear in mind that I have not entirely forgotten my own youth; come to me with

your problems, and you will find that we shall always get on famously together."

Prince Stefan was flattered. He had always regarded Baron Sarafoff as an insufferable meddler, who was always bobbing up inopportunately to interrupt some cherished plan. But the old boy was not such a spoil-sport after all!

"I'm sure nothing would give me greater pleasure," the Crown Prince said, "than to confer with you. Don't hesitate to call on me for assistance at any time. His Majesty has always seen fit to regard me as incapable of any serious services. I am glad to see that your own view of my abilities is different," and he nodded patronisingly to the grizzled old campaigner.

"I thank you, Sire!" the Premier answered, bowing deeply, and his beard hid the smile of amusement that flickered about his lips. But a few minutes later, as he descended the Palace steps to enter

his carriage, he allowed himself the luxury of an unmistakable laugh.

The Prime Minister's coachman looked up in surprise at the sound, for it was an unusual display for the self-contained old Baron.

"Must have had a glass too many!" whispered the footman, after he had gained his place on the box, and he jerked his head ever so slightly backward to indicate the occupant of the brougham-like vehicle.

But old Ketschko, who had been in the Baron's service for upwards of thirty years, did not take the trouble to answer his companion's comment. He knew that his master was extraordinarily well pleased at the outcome of some piece of business.

And the Crown Prince Stefan, too, displayed to his fellows a look of extreme complacency.

CHAPTER V

ON the morning following that first meeting in the trophy-room, Hubert had risen early, after a night of little sleep. Such slumber as came to him had been troubled with strange dreams, which fitted curiously into the current of his stream of consciousness, until the whole night seemed one long glimpse into the unreality of some weird Oriental story.

After he had finished the coffee and rolls that were brought to his chamber, he made his way to the gardens lying at the back of the lodge and followed along the hedge-lined paths which wove their way in and out. Here and there he came upon a gardener busy with his weeding; but of the guests of the night before he saw nothing, for it was still early. Find-

ing a comfortable seat placed invitingly beneath a cherry-tree, Hubert sat down to enjoy a cigarette. He looked up at the vine-framed windows of the lodge and wondered idly which might belong to the suite of the Grand Duchess.

For a long time Hubert sat there, still thinking of events of the night just passed. It was hard to reconcile their reality with the bright sunshine, and the twitter of birds, and the fragrance of flowers. And yet he had existed as truly last night. The crackling of the fire in the trophy-room had fallen upon his ears no less certainly than did the song of the lark now.

"A jolly queer situation!" Hubert told himself. "But I suppose the Grand Duchess has forgotten all about it. I'll wager that Prince Stefan has not. We'll have a day of reckoning—His Highness and I. By Jove! I believe he's as eager for it as I am."

As Hubert pondered over the strange-

ness of the world, and—unknown to himself—sighed more than once as his memory gave him glimpses of a pair of wonderful greenish eyes, he did not notice a blind as it was thrown back from one of the windows that gave upon the garden. If he had, he would have learned nothing, for the person who looked out for a brief second drew back quickly. Hubert was quite unconscious of being observed. But from behind the curtains some one peered curiously at the young Englishman, sitting alone so oddly—for, as I have said, it was very early in the morning.

Hubert was still wrapped in his thoughts when a little later a step sounded on the gravelled path behind him. He turned instantly and quickly sprang to his feet. It was the Grand Duchess Sonia, her hands full of roses.

“Ah!” she said. “You too!—you could not resist the beautiful morning. But you

have been idle. I have been busy, as you see," she explained, raising her flowers for him to admire.

"They are beautiful, your Grace," Hubert said, and his heart pounded hard against his ribs. "They are beautiful, and you—"

"Are very energetic—no?" and the Grand Duchess laughed mischievously.

Hubert let her interruption pass unchallenged. He had not meant his sentence to end as she would have it, but on second thought he felt that it was a bit presumptuous of him to begin making pretty speeches to the girl at the first opportunity.

"Will you wear one of my roses?" she asked him, then, relenting.

"With much pleasure, if you will choose one," Hubert told her.

"Oh, you must tell me which you like best," she said. "A pink one, or a white one, or a red? For me—I love the red,"

and she buried her pretty nose deep in a cluster of crimson blossoms.

Hubert thought they matched the red of her lips. He touched gently the flower her mouth had pressed.

"This one, please!" he said.

"Ah! so you prefer that colour, too?" she exclaimed.

"Well—er—perhaps not always that colour, said Hubert, somewhat confused. I've always thought red roses just a shade too violent, don't you know, to be in the best taste."

The Grand Duchess went off into peals of laughter.

Hubert looked at her in surprise.

"What have I said—or done—?" he began.

"Oh! you funny Englishman!" she cried. "Red roses not in good taste! *Là! là!* No, you shall not have one. You are not worthy. See, I will give you this nice little white bud."

"Oh, but you're not fair!" Hubert exclaimed. "Besides, I was not choosing the colour I preferred. I chose the one particular rose that's the most desirable in the whole world."

"Oh! so you know the Topchider rose! It is a beautiful variety. I did not suppose it grew in the West."

"Hang it!" said Hubert—"I mean, I beg pardon—but I'm afraid I don't know one kind of rose from another."

"Oh, you are quite incomprehensible," she said, but she carefully avoided Hubert's intent gaze.

"Please!" he begged, pointing again to the flower he coveted.

"Oh, well! You are all alike, you men—English, Russian, German, French—You always get what you want!" And she deftly pulled the blossom into Hubert's coat. "But you must take care that you do not want too much," she added. And then she smiled, and Hubert felt that

no more glorious morning had ever dawned, since the beginning of things.

"How can those stupid people spend so much time asleep?" she asked, as she looked toward the hunting-lodge. "I want to go for a ride, and there are just we two up."

"Perhaps you will let me go with you?" Hubert suggested.

A shade of perplexity crossed the girl's face for an instant. Hubert was sure she was thinking of the Crown Prince. That worthy's name had not been mentioned, and he felt no desire to bring it into their conversation.

"Do you really wish to come?" she asked. "If you are merely being polite, I should say, to be honest, that it was not worth your while. But if you want to ride with me enough to think it worth paying for by being made uncomfortable—to say the least—then you may. I wonder if you understand me?"

Hubert knew now that he had not mistaken the thought that had, in its passing, set its mark upon her face.

"Your Grace," he said, with great earnestness, "truly it would give me much happiness to go with you. And as for any unfortunate results—well! if you are quite sure they will not fall to your share—then I shall be content."

She looked at him searchingly for a moment. And then she said simply—

"I believe you. Come—let us hurry and dress. I will have Dmitry see that horses are saddled and waiting for us."

Along the forest paths they rode,—the Lady and Hubert. And the caressing branches touched them gently as they passed. Now a hare, startled by their presence, cocked his ears curiously at them, and hurried home to tell his wife that he had just seen the King and Queen of the wood. And now a brightly feath-

ered songster gave the pair a cheery blessing as they rode beneath the tree where he was perched.

Hubert was in paradise—and the Lady, too, was radiant.

“Tell me,” she said to Hubert at last, after they had chattered gaily of many things, “all about yourself. All about England and your life there. I have never been across the Channel. I’ve always longed to go—and always thought I would some day. Now it is unlikely that I shall ever see your country.”

“Hubert was touched by her interest. He told her of his father’s estate—of the old Tudor house, and the deer-park, and the carefully tilled fields marked out by ancient hedgerows. His boyhood had been spent in adventure in that fairy-land. Then had come school—Eton, where he had worked and fought and played with scores of other young Englishmen until he had thought himself wonderfully ex-

perienced of the world. And then he had gone to Oxford.

Hubert pictured with much spirit the ancient, ivy-grown buildings, the velvety-green lawns—centuries old—and he told of the boat-races, and foot-ball and the cricket matches. But of the descent of the London Belles upon the old University town he was quite silent. The rascal had the grace however to redden slightly, as he thought of that galaxy of beauty, and he felt frightfully uncomfortable when the Grand Duchess Sonia turned to him and innocently demanded—
—“Tell me about your English women, you must know many of them. I do not understand the English girls I have known.”

As Hubert looked at her, with her white flawless skin contrasting sharply with her black hair and the deep red of her lips, he was certain that in all Eng-

land there was no match for this divine creature.

"Your English misses are fond of sports, are they not? They like to play games, and to ride?"

"Yes—yes!" Hubert answered quickly, conscious that lost in his admiration for her he was not replying to her questions. "They are good horsewomen too, but, by Jove, they don't ride as well as you do." He saw with appreciation how her slight yet well-knit body swayed subtly with the movement of her mount, and he admired the firm but delicate way in which her hand felt her horse's mouth.

"I have loved horses since I was a little girl," she told him, simply. "It is my greatest pleasure to be out in the open like this early in the day. There's nothing to compare with the feeling of life and buoyancy it gives one."

Hubert wished that he might spend all the mornings of his life with her like this.

But he could not tell the Lady that. He could only talk commonplaces and tell her about the favourite horses he had had, from Peter, his first pony, to Bolero, his latest Irish hunter.

And as they talked gaily their horses carried them further and further out into the rolling country-side. When they came to a small brook, which ran placidly between willow-fringed banks, the Grand Duchess brought her horse to a stop.

"See!" she said. "How pretty it must be up there along the stream! Let us explore a little!" And so they left their horses with the groom who had followed, and rambled carelessly beside the tiny rivulet.

Soon they came to a spot where it was necessary to cross upon the rocks to the opposite bank. The Grand Duchess would not let Hubert help her. She was sure she was entirely able to manage the crossing alone.

Forgetful of his own footing, in his careful watch of her, Hubert slipped on a stone, sending one of his feet into the water.

They both laughed, which was the only thing they could possibly do, being young and joyful with the gladness of youth and summer time; but when a moment later it was quite necessary for him to touch her hand in assisting her to cross a tiny silver tributary of the stream, the laughter was hushed by the engulfing influence of a sudden immense emotion.

Their eyes met as their hands clasped close, and in that glance half the story of the future was told—just the first half of a beautiful, but quite ordinary and everyday story which is repeated a hundred times during the passing of each hour that goes to make up the life-time of the world.

“As it was in the beginning!”

Yes, the mating instinct was at the be-

ginning of all things—the marvellous mating instinct which is one part human, one part material, and two parts divine, that supreme instinct which gives magic to the commonplace and throws a veil of fine-spun gold over the gross and earthly.

"As it was in the beginning . . . And yet another new beginning had begun!

It was the first time they had been so close together.

Perhaps he should have avoided it. Perhaps he—whose boyish blue eyes saw things more clearly than they are often seen by the most ostentatiously penetrating gaze—perhaps he should have realised the danger.

But to-day—perhaps—it was different. Perhaps his brain was a bit clouded by the veil of his emotions.

He knew that already he regarded her differently from the way he regarded other women, and he knew that in touch-

ing her hand his heart was riotously trying to touch her heart. He wasn't being presumptuous—it was simply that he felt that he wanted to get rid of all barriers as quickly as possible.

This girl with the beautiful throat and the serious green eyes made a direct and instant appeal to every portion of his mental, moral and physical organisation. He could no more help touching her than the butterfly can help touching the petals of the rose. He didn't want to think anything out—not to plan anything or grapple with anything—he only wanted immediately to begin enjoying the rapture of being passionately in love with a girl who was the right age to be loved passionately. . . .

Oh! there was brilliance in her eyes, and there was rose-pink on her cheeks, and when she smiled it was without restraint.

He felt as if just at this precise moment life were beginning, as if it were absurd

ever to imagine that it could have begun before.

They stopped and rested upon the bank. The Lady lay perfectly still and tried not to be conscious of anything except the green of the leaves rustling overhead.

She would just go on thinking about those green leaves and—ah! no, she couldn't go on thinking about those because a little bird with a speckled breast had flown on to the bough! The little bird—a plump little preening hen-thing—was now attracting her attention, and—and—*there*, now another little bird had joined her on the bough.

But the new-comer was a slimly-smart young bird, and they were chirruping together and their beaks were touching, and—and . . .

With a flame the Grand Duchess's face grew hot, for she had suddenly remembered that these preening, twittering birds were part of Nature's stupendous

scheme, which was the main element of all creation.

These happy, chirruping birds were probably mated birds who had loved in the Springtime.

Everything and everybody seemed concerned in the sex-scheme, and the girl could feel a new rushing and stirring of her own blood.

Vague unrest, a longing which would not be explained, a strange heart-hunger—all these sensations she had known before.

But now this was something different.

She felt like a person rushing on toward a precipice—no, she felt as if the precipice were advancing toward her—no, she felt as if a great warm ocean of scented, swamping waves was about to engulf her—and in the waves she could see—she hardly knew what.

Life was beginning—the gates were opening as lock-gates open to show the

glory of a river that runs down to—
limitless sea—life—life!

“Sonial”

Hubert just said her name—there was
agony, gladness, appeal, and everything
else which means love—in the cry.
Then he dropped his mouth upon her
mouth.

This was the first time—the first time!

A kiss! O! wonderful dreaming rivulet
—a kiss! O! chirruping mated birds—
a kiss! O! Nature, perfect relentless
Nature—a kiss!

In later years the Lady dimly remem-
bered that kiss—as a person half suc-
cumbing to the fumes of ether remem-
bers.

Nothing of which she had ever read
or dreamed was like this—like this!

It was the day of her soul’s awaken-
ing—at twenty she was celebrating the
birth-day of her soul.

“Don’t close your eyes, my darling—

look at me, Sonia, look at me!" Hubert whispered, only half lifting the pressure of his lips as he spoke.

She obeyed, but the passionate blue brilliance of the eyes which met her own was almost blinding.

"I can't—I *can't*," she murmured, as the dark lashes fell and shrouded the innocence of her gaze.

"Oh! darling! Oh! darling!"—and as Hubert cried out with what almost sounded like an entreaty in his voice, the Lady felt the vibrating strength of an arm slipped between her shoulders and the green cushion of the turf.

He was holding her close, terribly close, till they seemed almost like one person. All the thoughts of love of which her nature was capable went out in earnest reciprocation.

"Don't—*don't*—we must go back now—we must go back *now!*" she cried, and Hubert felt the strength of her will as

well as of her body as she pushed away the pressure of his arms.

He smiled—a man's smile—and let her go.

There was a time ahead, and when a man had tasted the warm sweetness of a passionate woman's lips he may always look ahead. And then they sought the road again, while the two mated birds still chirruped on the bough of the tree.

There were few spoken words between them as they rode back to the hunting-lodge.

The early morning had slipped away. The lodge was astir with life when they returned. Captain Grenville, strolling about the lawn with his morning cigar, stared with frank astonishment as they came trotting up the drive. They saw him raise his hat and bow, but they did not hear his whistle of surprise. Nor did they feel upon them the wicked eyes of Prince Stefan as he looked out from

a window of the breakfast room to see who among his guests had been so silly as to ride at that hour.

As he recognised the Grand Duchess and Hubert, the Crown Prince swore softly.

CHAPTER VI

HUBERT and Captain Grenville went back to the Capital that day, for there were affairs of the legation that called them. Neither spoke much as they were driven to the station, but once in the railway-carriage, the Captain turned to Hubert and said—

“How the deuce came you to go riding with her Grace? Really, Hubert, I thought you had more discretion than to make the worst of an already bad situation. The Prince will hear of it and there’ll be the devil to pay.”

“Damn the Crown Prince!” Hubert said savagely. “He has no jurisdiction over me. I’m a free agent and I’ll do as I please in Sardalia or anywhere else.”

“Then you’ll not do as you please very

long in Sardalia," the Captain replied. "Stefan will give you your quietus as sure as fate."

"How about the Grand Duchess?" Hubert asked him. "Are her actions too subject to Prince Stefan's supervision?"

"My dear boy—no. If she wants to bait her future spouse it is her own affair. Very likely he doesn't dare raise a jolly row about it now. But rest assured, he'll make the girl pay later for flouting him. The ways of the Sardalian are devious. He's an expert in exacting payment for injuries. Stefan is no exception. Just bear in mind you're not a Grand Duke. A commoner with England behind him doesn't impress a Sardalian in just the way that a Grand Duchess with Russia for a protector does. England's a long way off. To the Crown Prince it's a shadowy realm at best. But for him Russia is a great

big immediate reality, that spells power with the biggest sort of P. Confound it, man! You worry me terribly."

"Oh! dash it all! Grenville—" Hubert exclaimed. "You're making a mountain of a mole-hill. Can't a chap be decent to this girl, I'd like to know? She gave me the chance to go out with her this morning. What was I to do? Tell her that I didn't dare? You'd have gone yourself, in the same circumstances."

"Good Lord! This is beyond me!" the Captain groaned. "I wish to heaven she'd choose her own kind to play with! I suppose you're a new species of animal to her. Wants to make the most of her time. Horribly bad form, too, you know, for her to go off riding with you unescorted."

"There was a groom along," Hubert objected.

"Not exactly the sort of chaperon to

suit the Continental Mrs. Grundy. Customs are quite different here to ours at home. This Lady has evidently been used to having her own sweet will. I foresee a stormy time of it in the Sardinian royal household once she and Stefan have launched their matrimonial ship."

Hubert winced visibly.

"Don't!" he said. "It's unbearable to think of that wonderful girl living with a beast like him."

"Might as well get accustomed to the thought now," said Captain Grenville. "Why! man, I believe you're over your ears in love with the lady already."

Hubert's face flushed hotly, and he did not trust himself to reply for some minutes. At last he said—

"Maybe I'm a fool, but I hardly see how I could decently have done otherwise than as I have. Let's forget this topic, Grenville. We'll never get any-

where discussing it. In a few days it'll all be ancient history. Her Grace returns to Petersburg as soon as the wedding is over." And Hubert looked unhappy at the very thought of her going.

"Right-O!" said Grenville. He knew that further argument was futile. And he settled himself back and buried his aristocratic nose in a novel.

But Hubert did not read. He sat staring out at the patches of grass and trees and sky that flitted endlessly past his window. During that day, and the following one as well, Hubert was like one in a trance. All his thoughts were of the glorious foreign girl. A vision of her filled his mind—a tantalising elusive picture of her whom he could not see until an enormous number of hours should have sped. He even caught himself, as the train rumbled on, making a mental calculation of the number of times his watch would have to tick before the

night of the state ball—then unbearably distant.

Captain Grenville wisely gave up any attempt to talk with Hubert. All that Hubert could think of was the wonderful Russian.

He adored her. He adored her intensely.

He could not possibly spend his life anyhow except with her.

Sport, clubs, other men, all other women, interested him not.

He even trembled a little when he thought of holding her in his arms. And when he and Grenville were being driven from the station to their chambers, as a flash from the eyes of a painted woman shot in between him and his dreamings he was seized with a wild inhuman desire to crush the poor strutting derelict beneath the wheels of the carriage.

It seemed so insolent for this painted

creature even to share the common bond of sex with the Grand Duchess Sonia.

For as children cast away their toys when the serious studies of school begin, so men cast away their poor human toys when the heart's real awakening is achieved.

Poor derelict castaway human toy!
Yet it may be that you are avenged more often than you think, more often than you can even guess!

For spring-time and perfumed rose-time are of but brief duration.

The morning of the day of the state ball arrived at last. At noon the marriage of the Princess Marie and the Grand Duke Peter would be solemnised, to be followed that night by the most brilliant function of the week.

Hubert dressed eagerly and more quickly than usual, whistling while he put on his shoes and singing slightly out

of tune while he deliberated in his choice of a shirt and tie. But a minute later, when the stud slipped through the button-hole of his admirably laundered shirt and lodged itself somewhere in the region of his right hip, the vocal exuberance came to an end while a wave of sudden sultry passion crossed his face.

The sound of Hubert's rage penetrated into the bed-chamber of Captain Grenville, who smiled knowingly at the fresh outburst. Hubert had been testy almost beyond endurance ever since their stay at the hunting-lodge—and Grenville knew that such a sudden change of disposition came to a man from but one cause.

"Bertie's still in a nasty mood," he said to himself. "Hope he's feeling pleasanter in case he meets the Crown Prince to-night."

But the expressions of extreme annoy-

ance that percolated from Hubert's quarters kept up in a right lively fashion. Hubert had learnt other words at Oxford besides merely those necessary to a study of Greek and philosophy. And he was furious with that stud for thwarting him—he would like to crush that stud beneath his heel and then scatter the valueless dust to the four winds of the sky—he would get that stud out of the way, he would—he would—ah! He had found the stud clinging to his spun-silk apricot tinted waist-coat!—well, there was nothing for it but to curb his fury and fix the stud into the shirt!

So Hubert restrained his anger and adjusted the stud, but the singing and the whistling had ceased, and a pucker of irritation was still left on his forehead.

Things that did annoy him did annoy him intensely that morning. His tie, however, made no resisting efforts and when after breakfast he had left his

gloomy chambers things seemed more or less right again with the world. He hailed a *fiacre* and rolled away toward the legation in a mood more like his customary one, except that he felt more than he ever had felt before that it was good to be alive; to be young, and strong and alive—and in love.

Hubert demoralised his driver by the gift of a double sized tip.

And the Grand Duchess Sonia? What of her all this time? For it is not to be supposed that she did not have her thoughts and moods, hopes and fears, joys and misgivings.

When a woman—that is to say an inherently moral woman—recalls with rapture the touch of one particular man's lips, it may be safely reckoned that she loves him, and if she loves him there is no doubt whatever that the kisses will be repeated.

And the Grand Duchess loved Hubert.

There were no half measures about it, with the result that often during the hours after she had broken away from the passion of his embrace, those same straining arms were once more holding and pressing her close.

Yes, she had a lover with blue eyes, whose passion blinded her, a lover whose lips smiled at her joyously after they had kissed, a lover who was chill to other women and devoted to her.

It was a wonderful experience, and it made the morning uprising a festival of anticipation, and the night-time solitude a dream of recollection.

She hardly troubled to ask herself where it would end. It was just summer now, and flower-time, and love-time, and kissing-time!

Oh! it was a wonderful time!

She felt the full force of her need to

be loved by this man with the brilliant blue eyes.

While he was with her there was the excitement of the moment to blur her powers of comprehension, but now that they were apart there came the potent factor of contrast to make her understand.

But even now she did not fully understand the completeness of her own surrender to the normal emotions of pitiable humanity.

That was to come later—later on!

CHAPTER VII

IT seemed to Hubert, as he entered the ball-room of the Summer Palace, that he left all care behind. The toilettes of the women—creations of the great *modistes* of Paris, Berlin and Vienna—were the most marvellous he had ever seen, insular Britisher that he was. They mingled in a never-ending maze with the bright uniforms of every country in Europe, reminding Hubert of the kaleidoscope with which he was wont to amuse himself when he was a child.

As if in a trance he bowed mechanically now and then as some one here and there in the gaily chattering throng recognised the young English attaché and spoke to him. More than one pair of

bright eyes dwelt for a brief moment on Hubert's, as he towered half a foot above those about him. But he saw them not. Only one form he sought in all that glad company.

Where was she—the Lady? En-sconced in a recess of the ball-room he watched the dancers circling the polished floor. The weird Eastern airs played by the Hungarian orchestra, brought all the way from Buda-Pesth for the occasion, fired him with strange imaginings. He was a fairy prince and somewhere in that constantly changing rhythmic living puzzle was the princess who for an eternity had awaited his coming to free her from this enchantment.

And then the spell was broken. Hubert found himself staring straight at the dashing figure of Prince Stefan skilfully piloting a lady in and out among the other dancers.

At the moment the Crown Prince's

partner was hidden from Hubert by intervening couples; and then, just as the Crown Prince swung his companion round, Hubert saw that it was she!

He would see the curve of her cheek—which looked delicately-tinted, smooth, and soft—but he couldn't actually see her face.

And her neck—oh! the back of her bare neck was really beautiful! (Fancy dropping one thistle-down kiss just below that tiny escaping curl! ah!) And she knew how to wear a scarf—just one of those white silver-flecked things from the East, which every traveller brings home.

In the brief moment that he saw her, these thoughts came crowding tumultuously into Hubert's mind.

And then the two dancers—Hubert saw but those two in all that throng—the two turned again, and he saw her face. He saw her smile at him.

He could have caught her in his arms and crushed her and kissed her for that smile.

He looked at her slimness and longed to fight battles for her sake—then he looked at the redness of her smiling lips and yearned to quench the smiles in a deluge of kisses.

He was in love with her. It was the first time he had ever been really in love with any one.

And then, before he knew it, she was borne away, and he lost sight of her completely.

Never mind. It would only be for a few minutes. He would find her again soon. He made his way quickly to the further exit, in order to catch a glimpse of her face in passing. But just as he reached his goal the music stopped and the dancers came crowding about him on their way to the balcony outside.

Well! he would find her later on. He

had no wish to make an uncomfortable scene for her while she was with Stefan.

He went to the billiard-room, and after he had finished a cigar and a "hundred up" he sought the ball-room again. But after scanning the swaying, gliding dancers for an interminable time—or so it seemed to him—Hubert decided that she was not there. He left the place.

She wasn't in the great, cold, formal drawing-room, among the girls and their partners and their chaperons galore; she wasn't in the writing-room; she wasn't on any of the corridor seats; she wasn't on the balcony.

This was annoying, because now that Hubert found it difficult to catch the desired glimpse of her face, the wish only increased in fervour.

A girl! It was very extraordinary for him to be so interested in a girl! But there it was—he wanted to see her face

more than he wanted anything else in the world.

So after exploring all the near-by rooms Hubert enlarged the field of his search. He walked the length of the long corridor, for he remembered a small piazza that could be reached from the further end of the passage. Skilfully avoiding the pitfalls spread for him by various willing maidens, he made his way quickly to the secluded, vine-covered nook.

And there, looking serenely down at the moon-lit garden below, stood the Lady that he sought. She was alone, and at the sound of his step she turned and in the half-light they saw each other's faces.

In another moment Hubert had whispered her name softly, and gently held both her soft, cool hands in his.

It is so hard to find accurate phrases

when the wine of music is inebriating the senses!

Hubert, unconsciously guiding the Lady in and out among the other dancing couples, only knew that he was supremely happy.

The Grand Duchess Sonia, too, experienced unwonted self-communings. For her it seemed that the world contained nothing but him—for him it seemed that the world contained nothing but her!

So they swayed with the rhythm of the piece, till suddenly the *motif* changed.

Then, with the change of the *motif*, the girl's whole nature changed. It was as if she were letting herself go without knowing it.

Ah! how the strings were wailing and how the melody was throbbing on the air!

She could look up at him and see the little cleft in the centre of his chin, and the sweetness of his lips when he smiled, and the light shining through one obtru-

sive little outstanding lock of hair which would insist upon breaking into definite curl.

Ah! the swell of the celli as they took up the crying of the theme! like a passion dirge of living loves!

Hubert looked at the girl, who nestled in his embrace. He looked at the cool pale skin, beneath which throbbed the pulse of youth; he looked at the little scarlet mouth—such a little mouth, but full and sweet and dewy—and he looked at the gentle rising and falling of her bosom.

In the crash of the music sounded triumph, wild mysticism and humanity; in the rapture of the notes rang love's uncheckable passion.

Hubert's breath came faster and faster—and the minor melody of the stringed band sobbed and swelled. With the masterful air of a man who demands the right to be a lover—"Let's go out," he said

quickly—"let's go out into the garden!"

"Yes, we will go out and invade the moonlight," she answered, and he followed in the sweep of her white lace skirts, followed with a firm look on his well-shaped boyish mouth, and a fixed brilliance in his blue eyes.

When they had passed into the shadow of the trees, he took one of her hands and drew it under his arm, drew it there so that he could more easily steer her toward the wicket gate, that led to a bower of shrubbery beyond.

Yes, they were going through the wicket gate and down the little path to a very paradise of lovers. They would be alone—entirely alone, as Nature meant lovers to be.

"Have you missed me, darling?" was the first thing he said to her.

"Missed you?" She instinctively temporised with him, for after all she was a

woman, strengthened by the knowledge of her own power.

"Yes, missed me, and wanted me, as I want you now, *as I want you now.*"

"Yes, I missed you, and—and—wanted you."

It was her first confession, but it came easily, far more easily than she could have believed that it would be possible to confess.

So at last the lover was satisfied.

She had missed him! She had wanted him—so now—nothing but love lay ahead!

They found a seat, screened by a bank of blossoming hedge, and sitting there both sensed the potency of a force that was stronger than they were.

She had felt like this before: once when an orchestra had suddenly broken into a waltz which swept upwards with a rush along the strings; once when a lark sang high while she lay in a blazing cornfield,

full of golden corn and poppies, and once when she was dining at a big warmed and lighted St. Petersburg restaurant—but the sensation of inexplicable restlessness had never been so strong as it was to-night.

It was pleasant to feel the cool night breezes blowing upon her face. Everything was mysterious, enchanting. The June roses were sending up a perfume almost unholy in its sweetness. The flowers were like girls with youthful faces and passionate souls.

And the moon was shining—not innocently, somehow, even though her light was white and silvery. And there were the stars, unreachable, far-away stars, sparkling with the brilliancy of elusive hopes and elusive desires, which can never be fulfilled.

Oh! what were these elusive hopes and desires beating so quickly at her heart?

Why was there a sob at her throat?

Why was there a strange bursting ache at her heart?

What did she want? What was there which she should have, yet had not?

As Hubert bent toward her softly, involuntarily she moved away, but the next moment a wave of womanly tenderness had made her kind. She was sorry for him, and she must show her sorrow.

So she would let him, this elusive nymph who could not however always escape, would let him kiss her.

He came nearer and felt that it would be a wonderful moment.

He loved her: and there was the red of her lips to be kissed.

He loved her: and there was the slimmess of her body to be admired.

He loved her—he loved her, and this was the only chance he would ever have of teaching her, even partially, to be a woman!

He bent forward, he put his arms

gently about her shoulders, he dropped his head lower to meet her mouth—then suddenly he saw her eyes.

Those green eyes were looking at him. He saw something in their depths that sobered the riot of his passionate manhood.

"Bless you, my dear," he said, and with the benediction laid a kiss of brotherly affection upon her forehead.

Somehow this was all he dared to do, then.

* * * * *

It had been a full pent-up hour of love and the terror which intense passion sometimes puts in our hearts was upon them both.

"It is late, I must go now," the Grand Duchess whispered, fearfully, for she suddenly felt afraid of the night, of herself, of everything.

"Yes, yes, you had better go, I am afraid," Hubert said. "But I must see

you again. You are going back to Russia to-morrow. I cannot let you go with merely a handshake and the sort of good-bye it would have to be if we saw each other to-morrow among a crowd of people."

"I know—I know," she answered. And then she took his head between her two hands, and drawing him close she whispered, with her lips pressed close into his ear, as if she challenged the whole world to steal a syllable of her lover's message—

"Meet me—to-night—in the library—after every one has gone!"

Not a single endearing word left Hubert's lips—the moment was too potent for speech—but he kissed her and held her and crushed her in the soft silence of the night.

There was no need to say good-night!—no need now!

CHAPTER VIII

WITHIN, the dancers still circled the polished floor. It was long past midnight—nearly two o'clock, to be exact—when Captain Grenville, standing under the colonnade of the Summer Palace, chatting and smoking with a little group of officers, felt a light hand laid upon his sleeve.

"Pardon! sir!" said an apologetic voice, as the Captain turned about inquiringly. "A message for you, sir!"

Grenville took the envelope that the man handed him, and excusing himself to his companions, moved apart a few steps as he tore open the missive. The royal coat-of-arms of the reigning house of Sardalia was embossed heavily at the top of

the paper, on which his first glance told him a note was written in a woman's hand, unknown to him.

But there was no superscription. Thinking that some mistake had been made, Captain Grenville looked at the envelope, which he still held, but he found no trace of ink upon it.

"Are you sure this is meant for me?" he asked the lackey.

"Quite, sir," the man answered.

With growing perplexity the Captain read the letter.

"What the deuce!" he said to himself—"meet her in the breakfast-room at four o'clock! Dashed if I know what this means. Lady's not very careful of her reputation," he thought, "wanting to see me at that hour of the morning! Oh! well! I ought to be game if she is." He stuffed the letter into his pocket, and turned to join his companions.

"Pardon! sir," said the servant again.

The Captain had forgotten the man. "Is there no answer, sir?"

"Who sent this note?" Grenville demanded.

"That I do not know," the footman replied. "It was handed to me by a lady's maid, sir—to give to you. She is waiting my return now, in the upper hall. Is there no answer, sir?"

"Say 'yes,'" the Captain answered, shortly, after a second's speculation. "Damned peculiar it seems to me!" he added, inwardly, as he rejoined his friends.

But the merry Captain did not enter again into the conversation in which he had carried a bantering part. In fact he scarcely heard what was said at all. And when Captain Christitch of the King's Hussars appealed to him in a discussion of high-power projectiles, his face bore only a look of blank surprise.

"By Jove! I missed everything that

you chaps were saying," he was forced to admit.

Common decency forbade comment on Grenville's abstraction, or mention of the message the Captain had just read. But Grenville detected more than one meaning look exchanged between the men-of-arms. To these Europeans one construction only was possible—an *amourette*. But the case in point, the penetration of the newest Krupp, was politely stated again for Grenville's benefit.

He left shortly, feeling that by staying he would only make an ass of himself again.

"Ah-h! these English!" laughed one of the French officers. "They look like saintes, but *ma foi!* they are the same as the rest of us!"

"*Certainment,*" said the Belgian, Fichot, "and there they have the advantage of us, too. If I had the face of an angel, like the young Aldringham, *par*

example, I would wager to have an *affaire* with any princess in Europe."

"Meestaire Hubert appears to be doing very well for himself, as it is," one of the others remarked. But as Billingslea, an under-secretary of the British legation joined the knot of idlers at that moment, the subject was dropped hastily.

Grenville wandered out into the formal garden, for he wished to be alone. But racking his memory to the utmost, he could not recall that angular foreign handwriting. It was all just a little too mysterious. Could it be a plot of some sort? He stopped short at the thought. Nonsense! he told himself. Of course the Sardalians were always capable of anything—but why under heaven should any one plot against him? If it were Hubert to whom the letter had been sent, it would be a matter to be proceeded in more carefully. Lord! The Crown Prince must be in a pretty humour, after

the way the boy's been in his way to-night, the Captain thought. And for a moment Grenville forgot all about his anonymous correspondent.

But soon his attention returned to the peculiar summons. He drew the letter from his pocket and scowled at it in the moonlight, in a vain attempt to wrest from it the secret of its source. But to no purpose. And the Sardalian eagle perched upon the shield at the top of the sheet seemed to flap its wings derisively. It was only the paper moving slightly in the light breeze, as Grenville knew, and he smiled at his fancy.

"Never mind, old boy," he said, addressing the bird with pleasant familiarity, "it won't be long before I know all about it. To be precise"—and he pulled out his watch—"it will be exactly one hour and fifty minutes."

From the Palace the sound of many voices singing came floating out over the

garden, and the Captain recognised the Sardalian national anthem.

"Hello! Shop's closing up!" he exclaimed, for he knew well the custom of the country, which ended every ball with a waltz danced to that measure, with all the dancers joining in the words. State balls ended earlier in Sardalia than in London. Sending his cigar hissing into the basin of the fountain, Grenville made his way quickly to the long left wing of the Palace, where he was quartered. He was of no mind to lose his whole night's sleep on account of any temperamental feminine writer of unsigned billets. His Swiss servant Fritz was nodding in the antechamber and the Captain awakened him sharply.

"I'm going to sleep now," he said. 'Call me at a quarter of four, to the minute. After that you may go to bed."

Captain Grenville awakened with a

start. The valet had been obliged to shake him, so heavy was his sleep. Though it seemed to Grenville that he had but just gone to bed, he jumped up at once. Looking at his watch, he found that it lacked exactly fifteen minutes of four.

"What clothes do you wish, sir?" his man asked him, puzzled by his master's early rising, but—well-trained servant that he was—not showing a trace of his curiosity.

"Oh! anything—but quick!" the Captain answered. "Yes—the grey tweed will do. Thanks—" and he dressed speedily. A hasty scrub—a pull here and there—a dab at his hair—and in a twinkling he was ready.

And then Grenville showed that in spite of his having flouted the theory of a plot, during his self-communion in the garden—he was, after all, a man of discretion.

As a final touch to his toilette, before leaving his apartment, he transferred from his portmanteau to his pocket a small Colt's revolver, first glancing at its chambers and twirling the cylinder beneath his thumb to make sure that it turned freely.

The passage outside he found to be dark as well as cold and one hand instinctively sought his slightly bulging pocket while with the other he groped his way along. As he turned a corner of the corridor he leaped back suddenly—but it was only an icy air-current that struck his face sharply.

He swore at himself for a fool.

"What the devil's in my nerves!" he asked himself in disgust.

He stopped for a moment at the open window through which the sudden gust had sucked. Looking out, he saw that the night was growing grey. With a little difficulty he could distinguish the

guards pacing slowly back and forth before the Palace and he heard plainly the sound of their heels upon the hard paths, and the jangle of their accoutrements. But he had no time to waste, if he would not keep his unknown lady waiting, so he started on again.

At last he came to the breakfast-room under the main roof. It had seemed an endless journey to Grenville, fumbling his way along in the darkness, but as a matter of fact he had consumed but a few minutes.

He opened the door softly and as he entered made sure that there was no key either within or without. Whatever the nature of the adventure might be, the Captain had no mind to have his exit cut off. How to execute an orderly retreat is one of the basic principles of warfare.

"Well! so far so good!" he thought, as he gently pressed the door shut behind him and stepped quickly to one side. But

there was no sign of life in the room. There was no sound at all, save that of the great clock that marked off the seconds with peculiar distinctness—a ticking which only seemed to emphasise the solitude.

The Captain's eyes gradually adjusted themselves to the darkness and he almost thought he could distinguish a faint—a scarcely perceptible movement of a white mass that dimly outlined itself among the shadows. And then—Good God! What was that! Ah! it was only the clock. It was striking four, with a clang that seemed, in that silence, loud enough to wake the whole Palace.

The noise steadied his nerves, at all events. Dash it! He would find out about that white thing, anyhow, and he crossed the room quickly. Surely it moved! And as he came closer, Grenville saw that it was a woman. She had

been sitting on a great leather divan, and rose at his approach.

"You are ver-r-y punctual, Monsieur!" a foreign voice said.

"Ah! yes!" Grenville answered, evenly, "but why not a little light, if you don't mind?"

"*Mais non! mais non!*" she protested quickly. "Certain-lee not. I mus' not be seen here. It would not be safe. Come—be seated, and vee can talk together-r." She sank back again upon the couch; but Captain Grenville remained standing.

"Thanks!" he said coldly. "I'll not sit down." And he waited for the woman to tell her business.

"Oh-h, no?" she breathed. "But you must be very *fatigué* after ze *bal*. I am sure you would find it ver-r-y comfor-r-table here." She laughed musically.

"Oh! I'm right enough," the Captain said. "Had forty winks, you know."

And still he waited for her to divulge the nature of her errand.

"What makes you so c-r-ross weeth me?" she asked plaintively. "A-r-r-e you like thees, always, befor-r-e br-r-eakfas'?"

"Not cross at all!" Grenville answered. It was perfectly evident that the woman was temporising with him. Was it because she hesitated to tell him her message? "Come!" he said. "You asked to see me, you know. And I hardly flatter myself that you are up at this hour for the express purpose of exchanging small-talk with me. Forgive me if I seem to hurry you—but since you wouldn't care to be seen here with me, it—er—it strikes me that it would be just as well to come to the point."

"Oh-h-h! How vonderfully you speek zee Engleesh!" the woman exclaimed. "Eet mus' be ver-r-y *difficile* to talk like that! My Lor-r-d! I nevaire could speek like that in a 'undred years. Eet

ees a fr-r-rightfully har-r-d language to learn—do you not theenk so?”

“I dare say,” the Captain answered, drily. “You see, I learned it when I was quite young.”

“*Oui, oui*—I forgot you are Engleeshman. You learn zee language when you ar-r-e a babee?”

“Er—yes!” said the Captain, quite shortly.

“Vhat a ter-r-ible theeng!”

“What’s that?” Grenville asked, with surprise.

“Dose poor leetle Engleesh babees—how mos’ awful har-r-d they mus’ hav’ to study. *Mon Dieu!* ’ow glad I am I vas not bor-r-n een England!”

“See here, now!” the Captain exclaimed impatiently. “Enough of this! What’s the important bit of news you have to tell me? Don’t keep me in suspense this way. Bad for the nerves, you know.”

"Oh! Là! Là! I 'ad forgot dose news entir-r-relee. You should not be—so fascinating, Meestaire Engleeshman."

"Come! come! That's a bit thick—in the dark too!" Grenville objected. It was fast growing upon his consciousness that the woman was merely playing with him. Well! he wondered what her game was, anyhow. "I say!" he said to her, "who the deuce are you, and what do you want of me here?"

"Zat, my fr-r-iend, ees a long story. Eet was for that *raison* I ask you so politely to seet down beside me. Come, an' you shall hear eet."

"What's your name—tell me!" he demanded—now full of suspicion.

"One moment! Vhat time is eet?" she asked him.

"You heard the clock strike just now, did you not? Well! it must be about two minutes past four."

"Ees that all?" she exclaimed, with relief in her voice. "I thought it mus' be later."

"Oh-ho!" Grenville said quickly. "Since it seems to be a matter of some importance to you, and I may be mistaken, I'll just strike a light and make sure."

"Oh! don't do that!" she cried, in alarm. "*Mais non!* Meestaire Hubert! You will spoil ever-r-ying!" She had jumped to her feet, as Grenville struck a match and held the flame aloft. He looked quickly round the room and spied a gas-jet on the wall near him.

"Stop! stop!" the woman cried, and she caught his arm. But the Captain held her off with his free hand and both turned on and lighted the gas with the other. In the sudden blaze they stood for an instant, staring at each other. And the woman gave a little gasp.

"Oh! go away queeck!" she said.

"Don' ask me why—but 'urry. Dere 'as been som' meestake!"

He caught her by the arm. "What chicanery is this—tell me? Who—" and then he stopped. "By the Lord Harry! What the devil are you doing here in the Palace? I didn't think His Highness went quite so far as to have his women here, with a house full of guests, too."

"Let me go. Let me go!" she begged him. "You are the Engleesh Captaine—I hav' seen you befor'—you will excuse dees beeg meestake."

"Tell me—what did you want of Hubert? What damned plot is this?" But she only struggled to free herself. "Ah! I see it—I was a fool—I might have known that letter was a ruse! Your pretty keeper planned to come in here and find Hubert with you, did he? And he's late—eh!"

"*Non! non!*" she gasped, brokenly. "Oh! eet ees not so. Go! Go away

queeckly—now—I tell you, you mus' not stay 'ere. I cannot stay 'ere. Come! Leave thees room. Go to your *suite*, and forget thees night."

"Humph!" The Captain released her arm. "Well! you played your part very cleverly. And since you must go now—good morning!" And he held open for her the door by which he had entered.

"*Merci!*" she said. "But I do not go zat vhay. And if you will be so kind"—she paused on the threshold of the door opposite—"will you tu-r-r-n off the gas? My aunt—who breeng me up when I vas a leetle gi-r-rl—always teach me to put out zhe light vhen eet ees not—how you say? requi-r-red."

"Right-O!" said Grenville and he reached up and turned the stop-cock.

And in the darkness the two doors closed simultaneously. And the great clock tolled off the seconds one by one—but there was none to hear.

CHAPTER IX

HUBERT could hardly wait until the ball was finished. He felt that there never would be an end to the interminable numbers that the orchestra played.

He forced himself to seek a partner now and then, for here and there he owed the courtesy. But those he danced with, whether debutante or matron, found the young attaché in an exceedingly abstracted state of mind.

Now and then he caught a fleeting glimpse of his Lady, as she passed him in the company of the Crown Prince or some Sardalian officer. But she never let her attention wander from her partner. Perhaps she felt that she dared not—with all the world there to see. For

if he who runs may read, surely he—and especially she—who dances, may interpret the meaning of many an intercepted glance. But at last came the Sardalian national hymn, with its singing—the same song that reached the ears of Captain Grenville, as he smoked meditatively in the Palace garden. This signal of the final dance found Hubert pacing impatiently up and down the terrace on the side of the Palace opposite to that at which Grenville looked up and heard the many voices floating out into the night. And while Hubert lingered in the moonlight, waiting for the merry-makers to say their good-nights, the whole ponderous bulk of the massive stone structure loomed up between and hid him from the Captain when the latter entered from the garden to snatch his short sleep.

For such is Destiny's method of working out the decreed order of events.

While Hubert waited in the library the immense silence of the spacious deserted room imparted to him a curious feeling of oppression. He, who had often gloried in the great still spaces of the earth—whether lonely Scottish moor or Alpine peak—now felt an eerie foreboding in the sombre quiet. Perhaps the sudden transition of the big room from a scene of gaiety, bright with the colours of evening gowns and uniforms of couples resting and chatting between dances, to a place of vague shapes, of dim outlines and deep shadows—perhaps that change worked subtly upon his overwrought nerves. At all events, he experienced a strange sense of loneliness. He felt a great need of companionship, of the definite nearness of some human thing—which was and yet was not a part of his own being. The moral self-sufficiency of the untouched bachelor was his no longer.

For the world-old love-longing which is every man's heritage had finally come down to him through the ages.

At last a door softly opened—and wonder of wonders! his Lady had come.

And so gladly she went to him, because she was his Love! And so joyously he welcomed her because she was his Beloved!—so joyously that when he reached her side he bent to kiss her on the lips. But she placed a light but restraining hand upon his arm—a gesture that forbade his intended caress.

Hubert looked at her very fondly and very tenderly. He understood that little touch of aloofness and dignity—understood and adored it as a man does understand and adore such touches in the one woman whom Nature has planned and designed for him.

He saw her quite distinctly, for his eyes had grown accustomed to the subdued light, and to his wonder she looked

lovelier than ever. He had not thought it possible.

She was a human woman, yet there was something of the frightened wood-nymph in the elusiveness of her demeanour. She might have been Arethusa flitting through Arcadia's groves in order to escape the passionate embrace of Alphéüs; in fact she gave Hubert the impression of always being ready to avoid some imaginary being who might be following in hot pursuit.

But this vague air of elusiveness is always intensely attractive to mankind, who is so accustomed to getting what he wants almost before he knows he wants it, and in spite of her gentle reproof the red curve of her small mouth suggested to Hubert a hundred fervid thoughts.

And with her soft pale skin, and her amazing deep-green eyes, and the childish slimness of her figure, combined with certain curves that were the curves

of ripening womanhood—nobody since Time began had ever been quite like her, and—and Hubert desired intensely that she should belong to him.

But in humble deference to her will—for was he not her devoted knight—her humble subject—waiting in the Court of Love? in his great desire to do her bidding he merely sought one of her slim hands and led her reverently to a deep, wide couch that filled one of the corners of the room.

Her eyes were wider open, less shadowed and more full of courage, and in some strange way struck him as even more pure than they had been before. They had been timidly pure, now they were bravely pure.

Her lips seemed fuller and softer, and without that demure compression at the corners, which so often mars the beauty of women.

And her smile—ah! now she was

ready to smile—to smile gaily, tenderly, sweetly, happily, simply, because she was at last in intimate touch with humanity, through him.

Yes, humanity was now her kinswoman. She could weep for the tears of those who wept, she could rejoice with the gladness of those who were joyous.

Birth, Death, Life—she seemed to understand them all at last, to marvel at their greatness, to comprehend their infinite wonder.

She had a woman's heart, and to all the world she was now able to stretch out a woman's hands. Things which had previously appeared uninteresting and barren were, for her, invested with actual fairness and grace, and her pulse beat time with humanity's pulse as the soul of a perfect dancer throbs in time to the lilt of the music.

She put her hand out and touched Hubert's. How strong and capable it

was! No dream-lover of her girlhood days had ever caressed her with a hand comparable to this!

"Oh, Beloved!" she whispered. "All the evening I have longed to be here with you, away from the world, and all the ugly things in it."

"Yes, yes, dearest," Hubert answered. "I understand." He knew only too well that she was thinking of the Crown Prince—the Crown Prince and the future. And the inevitableness of what must come filled him with an unspeakable dread.

"Let us try to forget, sweetheart," he said. "To-night we'll just be glad that we have each other—even though it's for so short a time."

"I will—I want to," she answered. "Oh! Hubert—it's so wonderful! I shall always be thankful for this sweet time—only think what a bright spot it is going to be in my life! Most women—

the fortunate ones—have years and years like this, a whole, long, glorious life with the man they love. But rarely is such happiness the lot of us poor creatures who have in their veins what the world calls royal blood. So you see, dearest, I am all the more greedy for these golden moments.”

Hubert felt a strange elation of spirit.

She seemed so very different from other girls—(it's true she was sweet and dainty and like a thousand others who are fragrant and fair as flowers—but love's fallacious beliefs begin at the hour of love's birth!) there was that air of unconscious appeal about her which demands masculine protection, and that air of intense magnetic femininity which compels masculine ardour and passion.

“I love you—I love you!” he murmured. And raising her hand to his lips he kissed it with all the fervour of his limitless adoration.

He was created to love this slim young girl in white—to love her as a man never loves in his flirtations or his amours, because he could only love her as the one woman who seemed different from all the others.

Hubert felt all this vaguely—though his thoughts came crowding too tumultuously one upon another for him to think with his accustomed clearness.

He only knew that she was Queen-Empress of that whole world that is peopled with lovers—that mystical, mythical, realm of delight called “The Land of Heart’s Joy.”

“I love you—I love you!” he repeated the words with a fierce intensity. “Tell me you love me!” and command and entreaty mingled strangely in his clear young voice, now so curiously shaken.

“Yes—yes—” she answered softly and vaguely as the crush of his strong arms

closed about her inevitably, and held her a prisoner.

"Yes—yes—" answered the Lady again. There was nothing else that she could, or needed, to say.

And her mouth and Hubert's met in one long kiss.

Ah! that kiss was a beautiful kiss!

And for a time the Lady lay passive in his arms.

Such strong, strong arms they were!—arms strong enough to be cruel if they were not passionately ardent instead!

"We were made for each other, weren't we, darling? We are the only two people in our world, to-night, aren't we?" And Hubert held her yielding body close; her slim, lithe, supple form—half-real, half-sprite she seemed, in the faint light of the deserted room.

As he watched the changing expres-

sions of her face and the emotional movements of her body, he more than ever realised the completeness of her charm.

She was a woman, a woman with fervid throbbing pulses, lawful desires, passionate tremors.

And he caressed her with a fierce tenderness.

* * *

Heavens! a time like that!

What a gift for which the gods should be thanked and praised!

And then there was peace while Hubert held her in his arms and kissed her with increasing tenderness and still growing passion.

"I cannot let you go for ever," he told her. "I must see you soon, soon. And you're going back home in just a few hours!"

"I know it's hard," she answered.

"Oh! it's a frightful wrench—to tear myself away from you. But what must be, must be."

"I'll come to St. Petersburg to see you," he said eagerly. "I can steal a week or two—oh! next month at the latest—and we will have a beautiful untroubled time together, with no jealous Crown Prince to keep suspicious watch over us."

"Dear boy," she said, a little sadly, it seemed to Hubert, "you are no longer the free young Englishman who came to this country only a few short weeks ago. Then the world rolled on and no one—except your own family, perhaps—noticed or cared when or how you came and went. But now all that is changed.

"Do you suppose that you could leave Sardalia without being followed by one of Stefan's secret agents? Dearest, a spy would travel with you all the way to St. Petersburg, and there would be others

awaiting your arrival at the railway station."

But such a prospect struck no fear into Hubert's young lover's heart. He laughed almost gaily as he exclaimed:

"But my darling—I'm not afraid of Prince Stefan nor of his hired cut-throats either. Don't you know that it would take a much greater obstacle than that sort of thing to keep me from seeing you?"

She patted his cheek lovingly.

"But you don't understand," she explained. "Every move you made would be reported to Stefan daily. And he is not the sort to stay quietly here knowing all the while that you were with me constantly. I'm afraid you don't understand. Of course you couldn't be expected to understand. You see—upon the slightest pretext Stefan would take the matter straight to the Czar. And the Czar would very soon find means of

making you realise that you were *persona non grata* in Russia. It would stir up endless complications—and I'm not at all sure you wouldn't be running a grave risk."

Hubert tried to kiss away her fears.

"Oh! if there's any danger I'm sure you overestimate it," he said, in an endeavour to dismiss her misgivings.

"Ah!" she replied, "there's much more at stake than concerns you or me, or Stefan either. It isn't a purely personal matter at all. My dear Love, it's a question of international politics that's involved. Even in these supposedly civilised times many events occur that would look very strange if reports of them ever found their way into the columns of your beloved *London Times*. No—it's impossible—impossible, that you should come to Russia now."

Hubert made no answer, but he rested his chin against the scented softness of

that wonderful hair and gazed dreamily into a corner filled with flickering phantoms and with shadows.

For a man is always able to think his own thoughts even when Love's glamour makes its most tremendous appeal to his heart and his passions.

Man is so different from Woman.
Alas!

* * *

The time had flown incredibly.

When somewhere in a distant room a clock struck four Hubert could scarcely believe his ears. But still they lingered; for such is the way of a man with a maid.

They heard a cock crow, and still they stayed there, clasped in each others' arms. For was it not the last time?

"Ah! my Heart's Delight," the Lady said, "many and many a time in the darkness of the nights to come I shall feel your arms around me."

And into Hubert's mind there came those wonderful lines of Keats'—the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. He said them—whispered them softly to his Love. For the incomparable beauty, the exquisite sentiment of two passages of that immortal song were suddenly brought home to him as never before—

“She cannot fade, though thou has not thy
 bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

.

More happy love! more happy happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting and for ever young.”

Hubert never forgot the immense pathos expressed in those words of bitter-sweetness.

“Take me out this way, my Hubert,”
the Lady said, “through the little door.”

There was a short and seldom used passage beyond, which led to the breakfast-room. By using that room as a thoroughfare to the main corridor, the Grand Duchess knew that they could quickly reach the staircase that ascended to her suite, in that manner avoiding the much longer circuit along the hall by which Hubert had himself reached the library.

It was only a few steps, once they had crossed the floor of the great book-lined room. Hubert wondered contemptuously how many of the volumes the Crown Prince had ever opened.

The short passage was black as pitch, but in another minute they were in the breakfast-room, groping their way slowly toward the door that gave upon the main corridor.

And then—Good God! what was that? The jangle of spurs along the corridor, coming nearer and nearer!

At the unexpected sound the Lady's heart all but stopped for a moment—brave as she was. And then it beat on. Afterward she remembered supposing that it would continue beating with healthy and regular normality—but for an instant all the zest and *verve* seemed to have departed both from body and soul, and to Hubert all the kisses and rapture seemed instantly to have become detached portions of the past, like ancient relics laid by on a dusty shelf.

And then the doot opened

CHAPTER X

THE door opened, and Prince Stefan and his hunting-party entered.

"Back! back!" Hubert whispered madly to the Grand Duchess as he urged her away from the door. And at that instant a man bumped into Hubert and instantly grappled with him.

"There's some one here, your Highness!" Lieutenant Petkoff's voice called out in the darkness. "Quick! one of you! Catch his other arm!" And as others hastened to Petkoff's assistance Hubert ceased his struggling, for he saw that it was useless. For a short space there was complete silence. Hubert stood speechless, still helpless, in the hands of his captors, while the Grand Duchess Sonia drew back into the deepest shadows of the room.

"Well!" Hubert said at length, "do you take me for a thief, that you hold me so fast? Perhaps His Highness thinks I have the royal plate. Why don't you search me, gentlemen?"

"I say—easy there—better let him loose," a voice drawled. At the sound of the English accent, Hubert's hopes rose. The situation had seemed desperate beyond belief. But thank God! he thought—here was one friend, at least. If he could only spar for wind for a bit perhaps he could contrive to whisper to the Englishman and with his help enable the Grand Duchess to escape before she was recognised.

Prince Stefan laughed. And then he said easily to the two who still grasped Hubert's arms—

"Yes—by all means—don't lay violent hands on a guest." And to Hubert—"I apologise for breaking in so rudely upon you. We did not expect to find the

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breakfast-room occupied so early. Pray pardon us for intruding. Or—perhaps you will wish to join us in our coffee—you and your fair companion. Come! it would be most gracious of you both, I'm sure. It's not often we have the honour of feminine society at so early a meal."

"I thank you, Sire," Hubert answered. "You are very kind—but that does not surprise me—knowing your Highness as well as I do."

"Good!" the Crown Prince said. "It will be a real pleasure to us all. We should be charmed by your company. But the lady does not seem to favour the idea altogether. That is—unless we may take her silence to mean assent."

Hubert was fearful lest the Grand Duchess should speak. Her voice, he was sure, would be recognised at once. And unless he could direct attention from her he knew that she would not

tamely keep silence under such innuendo as the Prince was certain to employ.

"You're up early—" he said to Stefan. "Rather a break in your Highness' routine—is it not? I've understood that this was the time of night when you began to get your beauty-sleep." His even tones belied his distress. It was only with the greatest difficulty that he could frame such words as he groped wildly for. A cold sweat broke out upon his forehead and he could feel the blood pounding against his ear-drums. He moved in the direction from which his fellow countryman's voice had reached him, but among the confused group he could not identify the man.

"You seem to be very well informed as to my habits," the Prince said, icily.

"Yes—" Hubert rejoined promptly. "They're a matter of common talk, as perhaps you know." He could tell that he had scored, for there was a barely

audible sound—the mere ghost of a laugh—from one of the company.

“At all events,” said the Crown Prince, “it’s quite evident that common talk failed to inform you of my plans to-day. You may as well admit that you’re considerably in my debt.”

“In what way?” Hubert asked him.

“A new sensation is certainly worth having—is it not? I’ve given you the surprise of your life.”

“Sire,” said Hubert—“I assure you, nothing that you might do would surprise me. I believe you capable of anything. (Damn the fellow!).” Hubert groaned inwardly. He could gladly have silenced that sneering voice—his hands itched to close on Prince Stefan’s throat.

“I thank you,” the Crown Prince assured him, mockingly. “I will try not to disappoint you.”

On the whole, Stefan was enjoying the

situation hugely. He would play with this Aldringham as a cat with a mouse. He would keep the fool squirming in suspense until it pleased him to bring this scene to an end. As for Mitzi—the girl had played her part superbly! He would not forget her. She should be well rewarded.

Meanwhile, Hubert suffered all the tortures of the damned. He cursed himself for having exposed the Grand Duchess to the danger of such a situation. His hand sought his revolver. If he began firing, in the confusion that would follow perhaps she could escape. No remedy was too desperate. It all seemed like a horrible nightmare, with the Crown Prince some ghastly incubus weighing him down and slowly strangling him. If he could have shouted it would have been an enormous relief. And what agony the Lady must be enduring! The thought of it tore at him

like the claws of a beast. Great God! Would this never end?

Then it occurred to him suddenly that if he could only get the ear of the Englishman for a second—whoever the chap might be—he could give him his cape and whisper to him to throw it round the Grand Duchess to conceal the tell-tale white of her evening-gown. Then, perhaps, she could escape from the room unnoticed, before her identity was known. But how could he find the fellow? In no way, obviously, so long as he and the Crown Prince did all the talking.

“Is Count Von Kallay of your party?” asked Hubert bluntly.

“At your service, sir!” said a voice close beside him.

“Ah!” Hubert was not surprised.

“And Nemers?” he asked again.

“You honour me by the question,” exclaimed that worthy from across the room.

"Not at all," Hubert told him. "You are unforgettable, quite." And then, in a frantic attempt to make the conversation general, with the hope that the unknown Englishman would betray his whereabouts, Hubert said:

"You gentlemen have just come from one of your famous little card-games—I take it."

"On the contrary," the Crown Prince answered, "we have all of us just risen."

"Is it possible!" Hubert exclaimed in mock surprise. "Come! I thought that when the Count and Herr Nemers were together at this hour it was a foregone conclusion that they had been giving somebody a very interesting game."

"Nothing of the sort," Stefan said, somewhat peevishly. "We made up a small party last night, to go boar-hunting this morning. We're due at Gen-gich Forest at six o'clock, when we hope to find the game coming down to the

river to drink. That accounts for *our* early rising."

Hubert ignored the implied question as to the reason of his own appearance at so unearthly an hour.

"Sorry I can't join you, I'm sure!" he remarked. "It is a sport I've always wanted to try, and never yet had the opportunity. We don't hunt the noble boar in England, you know, *do we?*" He added the last two words at random, all but praying that they would be answered.

"Right-O!" The English voice spoke again out of the darkness—not two paces behind Hubert, so it seemed, and his hopes rose high at the welcome sound. "Pheasant's the biggest game we ever get at home."

"Come!" Prince Stefan interrupted, "Why not join us, Aldringham? While we're having breakfast you can make a quick change into hunting-clothes."

"You're very kind, your Highness," Hubert answered, stepping cautiously backward, "and I beg to be included in some other hunt—on some other day. As it is—this morning I happen to have a previous engagement. My fellow Britisher, I'm sure, will represent our country to perfection. I might make him blush if I went—for I'd be only a novice at the sport."

And then full in Hubert's ear the Englishman laughed. It was music to Hubert.

"All you'd need do would be to pick out a convenient tree to climb, if things got a bit too lively. You'd not be the first boar-hunter to save his skin by such means—I did it myself once."

During the ripple of amusement that followed Hubert reached out a hand and found the Englishman's bulk looming large beside him. He stepped close to the unknown and whispered—

"Help me, old chap—I'm in a devil of a fix."

"Right-O!" came the smothered answer. "What is it? What can I do?"

But Prince Stefan was speaking again and his words were addressed to Hubert, who did not dare drop his part in the give-and-take of the farce that every minute was so near a tragedy.

"Perhaps—" the Crown Prince was saying—and Hubert did not mistake the hidden meaning of the speech—"perhaps it would not be the first time that our friend Aldringham was treed."

Again came an echoing laugh from the listeners, who had begun to realise that Prince Stefan was grilling the young English attaché, though there was something in the situation that they did not comprehend. In that brief respite Hubert slipped his cape from his shoulders and pressed it upon his neighbour.

"Here—" he said hurriedly. "Throw

this over her, and try to get her out of the room. I'll keep the others occupied."

"Good!" the man answered. "There's a door at the further end of the room. I daren't try this one." He knew that the Crown Prince was standing too close to the door that gave upon the corridor—the one by which they had all entered.

"Hurry, for God's sake!" Hubert urged. And turning toward Stefan again, he said to that worthy:

"Your Highness jests at my expense. Let me tell you plainly that the mere barking of curs never yet sent an Englishman scurrying for safety."

"Bravo! Nobly spoken, my fine fellow!" Stefan scoffed. "'Tis a shame, really, that a chap of your spirit should not have more of a chance to show his true colours. Why! man—you're wasting words in the dark here—hiding your light under a bushel, so to speak. We're

losing half the effect of your heroics. Come! A light there—somebody!”

In the darkness about him, Hubert’s anxious eyes sought the patch of white that he hoped not to find. Ah! thank God! it was gone—yes, gone from the corner where his Lady had stood. But was she safely outside? He could not tell. He could only hope. And yet he dared not let the blessed veil of night be dispelled.

Some one struck a match—and Hubert snatched it flaring. His fingers, closing over it, snuffed out the blaze. There was an exclamation of surprise, but not from Hubert. Though the sputtering sulphur had burnt deep into his hand, he did not know it.

Another match crackled sharply in the tense silence and with a blow Hubert sent a figure crashing to the floor. There would be no more light from that quarter at all events.

Hubert wondered queerly why no one spoke. He learned afterward that everybody supposed that some one had knocked over a chair or some such object, in the dark.

"Light the gas! Are you all idiots?" the Prince cried with impatience. He had waited long enough. He would put the screws on this English upstart.

"We need no lights here!" Hubert said clearly. "The next man who strikes a match does it at his peril."

"You dare to countermand my orders—you dog!" Stefan exclaimed hotly. "Here, a light!—have you no matches?"

"Yes," the Austrian, Nemers, answered, and with the word he held aloft a flickering flame to find a gas-jet.

A sudden shaft of fire leaped out from the blackness, as Hubert's revolver spoke sharply.

And then the match no longer blazed, but some one swore softly. Hubert's

bullet in choking out the flame, had found another mark as well.

Then came a babel of words—a curious, momentary wave—and then more silence.

“Seize this fool!” shouted Stefan. But Hubert felt the weight of no arresting hand. Prince Stefan’s followers were not eager to overpower an armed man in the dark, who had already showed that he both could and would shoot straight.

“A light, then—somebody! Here! Where are those matches? I’ll light the candles—if you’re all afraid.”

“I dropped the box on the floor, your Highness—” the Belgian answered, “and I can’t find it.”

“I’ll shoot at the first flicker of light that shows!” Hubert said firmly. He had found the wall and stood with his back to it—resolved not to be smothered by an attack from behind.

But no hand laid hold of him—and not one of the valiant boar-hunters seemed inclined to draw his fire again.

The Crown Prince fumed furiously. He had no stomach for being held at bay by his prey in such fashion.

"Pull the bell-cord!" he ordered. "You! Petkoff!" He snapped the words out viciously. "You'd ring fast enough for brandy!"

"Very well, your Highness," the fellow answered, for he dared not cross his patron.

"Sorry! but I shall shoot at the first man I can see moving," Hubert said quietly.

"Petkoff! You heard me!" the Prince was determined to put an end to the absurd turn the affair had taken.

"Certainly, your Highness!" the Lieutenant answered.

The bell-cord as it happened, hung from the wall close to Hubert's shoulder.

Petkoff knew it, and the rascal had no relish for the task that his royal master had set for him.

He knew that he must make some move or for ever lose favour with the Crown Prince.

He thought quickly.

"One moment—and it shall be done, Your Highness!" he said, to gain time—for he had not the slightest inkling of a solution to the sudden problem.

But Lieutenant Petkoff had not lived by his wits all his life for nothing. In a flash it came to him that it was growing light outside—though, as was to be expected, no glimmer of grey had crept through the heavy hangings at the windows. *Cré nom!* how amazingly simple! He would creep behind one of the curtains, give a quick pull, and *voilà!* it would be daylight. And he—he would be safe behind the curtain, hid-

den from the pistol of this devil of an Englishman.

In the darkness Hubert did not perceive a figure as it moved softly across the room. And then came a sudden *swish* and a great flood of light, and he found himself at the apex of a fan-shaped staring group, with Prince Stefan glaring at him malevolently.

Hubert turned instinctively and looked to his left—down the length of the long room—and his heart sank within him. For there stood a man straining his shoulder against the door, while close behind waited the Grand Duchess Sonia. His ruse had failed. The door was locked.

Hubert saw that the game was up. In another second the curtains of the other windows were thrown back, and the breakfast-room was quite lighted by the soft rays that were streaming in from the East. For it was daybreak.

Prince Stefan's gaze followed Hubert's, and as he caught sight of the two figures by the distant door he approached them quickly.

"Surely you're not going now!" he called sharply.

And then the Grand Duchess turned and looked him full in the face.

"Apparently," she said, "that pleasure is not to be ours."

CHAPTER XI

EVERY soul in the room stood like some graven image, and the man beside the Grand Duchess still kept his hand upon the bronze door-knob. Hubert saw that it was Sir Charles Roslyn, who had come from St. Petersburg for the week.

Prince Stefan was as one turned to stone. And then his lips parted, and closed again, but no sound issued from his mouth.

Hubert, standing at one side as he did, could see the whole scene. It reminded him curiously of some *tableaux vivants* that he had witnessed just before leaving England. In a queer detached fashion, he seemed to be a spectator gazing at some dramatic stage-picture.

"So it's you!" the Crown Prince stam-

mered slowly, at last, as he continued to stare fixedly at his royal fiancée. He seemed for the moment to be robbed of all control of his body. Like one in the grip of some terrible paralysis, he had not moved, except as his lips framed those words. And then a convulsive shudder shook him and with a visible effort he threw off the lethargy that had held him helpless. He half turned and looked at Hubert with a gaze of implacable hate.

"And this is your paramour—" the Prince added, his words cutting crisply into the silence of the place.

"You have shown excellent taste—and I congratulate you," he said to Hubert.

Hubert felt the hot blood sweep across his cheeks as Stefan spoke. Every fibre of him was strung to the highest pitch, every muscle quivered in answer to his passionate desire to leap upon the Prince and beat him to the ground. The latter

looked meaningly at one of his comrades who stood nearest Hubert, and the fellow sprang in quickly and grasped the revolver that still gleamed wickedly in Hubert's hand. There was no struggle. Hubert relinquished the weapon without a word. His anger was too primitive for him to seek the help of such modern instruments of death. The spirit of the cave-man that surged up within him called for nothing but the feel of his enemy's throat pulsing beneath his fingers. Mere speech failed him utterly.

Prince Stefan turned his back contemptuously upon Hubert, and a sinister smile curled his cruel lips as he bent his gaze once more upon the Grand Duchess.

"Your lover has exhausted his flow of fine language, it seems," he sneered. "I dare say he realises that explanations have no place here, in the circumstances. But we'll not waste words discussing him. The unwritten laws of Sardalia

provide amply for offenders of his stamp. Your own case, now—that is more difficult. Were you merely my guest it would be quite simple. We should then be able to dismiss this liaison as one of the little diversions to which Russian ladies of rank are doubtless prone. Truly, we must admit that the fashions set by the famous Catherine of old still persist. But unfortunately there are complications. Your betrothal—” Stefan halted and his next words came with difficulty—“your betrothal—to me—places us all in a peculiarly difficult position.”

And then Hubert spoke quickly.

“Your Highness!” he said, “you are entirely mistaken in your assumptions. Let me say a few words before you insult this lady further. I—I contrived, by trickery, to bring her to this room some hours ago, at the close of the ball. And I have deliberately kept her here

against her will, while I attempted to force my unwelcome attentions upon her. The—er—the Grand Duchess is quite innocent of any voluntary part in this affair. I beg you to retract at once what you have said to her. As for me—well, as you say, I suppose the customs of your country are clear enough in respect to that phase. I have no wish to discuss the outcome so far as I am concerned. But I tell you—you are monstrously mistaken in what you profess to think of this lady.”

Until this moment the Grand Duchess had said nothing. She had stood with her head held high. No trace of guilt, no waver of dismay shook the imperiousness of her bearing as she stood there unafraid and braved the shameful faces that confronted her.

As Hubert spoke she looked at him with the radiance of her woman's soul shining proudly in her wonderful eyes. And when he had finished her eyes still

lingered lovingly upon him. And Hubert saw his Lady smile at him,—a smile that was no less than a caress. And neither of them cared who saw, or knew.

At Hubert's self-accusing words the Crown Prince turned quickly to his companions.

"You heard," he said briefly. "Please remember, gentlemen, that this man is a confessed black-guard—and that he has admitted voluntarily the part he has played here to-night."

Prince Stefan did not for a moment believe Hubert. His own evil mind permitted but one construction of the rendezvous on which he had unwittingly stumbled. But he seized eagerly upon Hubert's avowal as a sufficient warrant for the vengeance he meant to wreak upon him.

"Sonia!" he continued, bowing like a dancing-master, "I hasten to retract what I have said. You will recognise, I am

sure, that the stress of this situation has been enough to turn a cooler head than mine. Forget what I have said, I pray you. These gentlemen are all our friends. They have already forgotten what they have heard here—all except the confession of this degenerate creature, Aldringham.”

Stefan had seized with eagerness the opportunity to gloss over in public what he felt in his heart to be an unpardonable affront. He knew that to press the issue would be to bring a scandal upon his house that would ring throughout Europe. And he resolved quickly that such a calamity must be avoided. But he swore to himself that so long as he lived he would make his spouse-to-be pay every day of her life for this unpardonable offence. He would inflict upon her a never-to-be-forgotten penalty. She should not escape.

But Stefan's plans were ruthlessly up-

set. It was the lady herself who frustrated them.

"Stefan!" the Grand Duchess said, as soon as he had finished, "your apology is spoken with too much ease. You cannot deceive me with your sweet words. I will save you the trouble of playing the part—in public—of a mistaken and repentant lover. This Mr. Hubert Aldringham, who is too noble to breathe in a place contaminated by such as you, has tried to shield me. He has lied like a gentleman to protect me. I am here willingly, and what time I have passed in his company I have spent freely, gladly, of my own volition. Why should I dissemble? This gentleman's little finger I hold dearer than the whole world. And to-day I was going away from him—never to see him again until I came here as the Crown Princess. There has never been any pretence of love between you and me, Stefan. You

have known all the time in what light I regarded you. And as for you—you squandered long ago any capacity for the sort of love that you may have once been capable of.

“You seemed very eager a moment ago that your followers should remember this gentleman’s words. Well!—let them remember mine. Every soul in this room may bear witness to what I say.”

Her glance moved here and there from one mute listener to another. And there was not a man—not even the greatest villain of them all—but thought her glorious, and counted Hubert the luckiest man in the world.

“No! no!” Hubert protested, but before he could say more Stefan stepped toward him quickly.

“Silence!” the Crown Prince cried. “I’ll give you an opportunity to talk later.” And he turned to Petkoff and

Von Kallay and said—"Take this fellow away—and stay with him until you hear from me."

Hubert's arms were quickly interlocked with those of his two guardians. But Stefan's men had scarcely taken their places beside him when a warning cry cut quickly through that overwrought atmosphere.

"Stop!" The command, sharp and insistent, came from the Grand Duchess. "He shall not leave this room!" she exclaimed and she quickly crossed to where Hubert stood. "Take yourselves off!" she commanded the would-be jailers, and the two dropped their captive's arms sheepishly and stepped back, overawed by the girl's magnificent mastery.

"Stefan!" she exclaimed, "leave this room! Leave us, and take your precious hunting-party with you. You have played the buffoon long enough.

If you wish this incident to be threshed out further, let Baron Sarafoff come to me. If need be, I'll delay my going in order to talk with him. But I do not want to see you again before I leave. Have the goodness to keep away from me. Don't force me to humiliate you further before your friends."

The Prince smiled, but it was with little grace.

"For this once," he said, "your wish shall be honoured. You may stay here with your Englishman. Make the most of your opportunities, for it will be a long, long time before Mr. Hubert Aldringham will be seen in Sardalia again."

In another instant Hubert and his Lady stood alone in the deserted breakfast-room.

CHAPTER XII

HUBERT took his Lady in his arms.

“My Magnificent One!” he said softly. “Do you know that you are the most glorious being in all this wonderful world?”

She smiled at him wistfully. There was gladness in her face, too; for she saw that her lover had forgotten in that moment the very existence on earth of any except themselves. She knew that Hubert’s immense love for her had immediately crowded out all thought of Prince Stefan and the *impasse* in which they were placed. And she stroked his cheek tenderly, and wished that he might never be brought back to the stern realities that faced them.

“You’re troubled—” Hubert whis-

pered, as he half-read her thoughts. "Ah! Stefan! I had actually forgotten him for the moment. With you close in my arms, and filling my mind and heart, there's no room left for troubles."

"But they exist, my Hubert. All the forgetting we can do doesn't make them any the less."

Hubert kissed her.

"Let's not magnify them, at all events, dear," he said gently. "I know the Prince is almost mad with rage. But, after all, what can he do?"

"Ah! Hubert—you are in danger! Stefan will work you some great injury—if indeed he does not make an attempt upon your life."

"Oh! it's not as bad as that—" Hubert told her. "But what of your future—as the Crown Princess? It is impossible. Stefan would treat you unspeakably. Day after day, month after

month, until the dragging years fell into decades, you would still be paying the penalty for offending him. Your whole life would be one long torture."

"But I'd still be loving you, my Hubert," the Lady said softly. "And no matter what comes, always remember, dearest, that I shall still have the memory of these precious hours. No act of Stefan's can ever make me regret what has happened."

For a short space they stood in silence, while Hubert held her in his protecting arms. He knew with an all-conquering conviction that she belonged to him.

He felt that it was his right always to be near her and comfort her, and to shield her from whatever harm might threaten.

"My beautiful Love," Hubert said at last, gently, "we belong to each other. You are all mine, as I am wholly yours. This wonderful bond that brings us to-

gether is too strong for us to break ruthlessly. Do you think that I can go away from you, knowing that I leave you to a fate compared with which death would be the greatest boon? You're young, and glorious and vital! And yet I could more easily see you dead than relinquish you to the horror of that living death to which your marriage with Stefan would condemn you."

"Ah, my Sweet—let us forget all that," the Lady said softly. She stroked Hubert's head with her smooth hands and gazed long and wistfully into his troubled eyes.

"We'll forget it—yes," he answered. And a great resolve formulated itself fast within his consciousness. "We'll forget it together!" He spoke quickly, and the Grand Duchess felt his thews tighten as his body quickened under the spur of his shaping thought. "You must come with me. I'll not leave you

here for that scoundrel Stefan to visit his vengeance on. Already he has insulted you unspeakably. What his conduct would be when you were once his wife is too dreadful to imagine. Come—come! We'll leave at once. We'll get the Occidental Express this morning. And by night we can reach Vienna and be married at the British Embassy."

As Hubert's meaning impressed itself upon the Lady her eyes opened wide with wonder.

"Oh! you are quite mad," she cried. "It is impossible."

But Hubert would not be denied.

"My dear one," he urged, "many titled—yes, and noble—ladies have married commoners. It is by no means an unheard-of thing. Think for a moment of what life would mean for us two together! Our world would be flooded with the light of love. And how different from the appalling darkness, the in-

terminable, drab days of torment—if we part here. I cannot—I will not leave you. I know I'm asking you to renounce your rank—to become only the wife of an English gentleman. I know you'd be cut off from all the associations, every friend, of your girlhood. But I am willing,—yes, glad to ask that sacrifice of you, because I'm sure you would be happy.”

“Let me go, please,” the Lady murmured. And Hubert drew her gently to a near-by seat. “It's not all that, that stands in the way, Hubert,” she continued slowly. “Surely you must know that my love for you is great enough to make me glad to make such sacrifices for you. But there is just one sacrifice I cannot make. I cannot forsake my duty to my country.”

“Your duty!” Hubert exclaimed. “Your duty should not require you to lay down your young life upon the altar

of a nation's needs. The world expects such services from a man, but what civilised country demands such deeds of a woman? We're no longer in the dark ages. And a disappointed Balkan prince ought not to offer a very serious problem for Russia to solve."

"It's not Stefan," the Lady answered. "I would not give a thought to his injured dignity. If that were all—" and she seemed to see in some mystic manner as she sat there musing, strange things that were invisible to Hubert's anxious eyes.

"Do you know," she asked him suddenly, "what price the world would have to pay if I came with you? The price of war, with all its bloodshed, and suffering and sorrow. My country has tried for a hundred years to effect some lasting alliance with Sardalia. Sardalia has always been the disturbing factor among the Balkan States. With Sar-

dalia unfriendly, Russia could never feel that her frontier was safe. Austria is only too ready to reach out a conciliatory hand to the Sardalians; and if that hand should ever be clasped it would mean certain armed conflict for Russia. What is my happiness, what is my life—what are they when weighed in the balance against the broken bodies of thousands upon thousands of useful men, and the bereavement of orphans, and the sadness of many women?”

Hubert ceased his restless pacing back and forth and sat down upon the seat beside her.

“Listen to me for a moment,” he said. “It is impossible to look into the future. What you feel would so surely happen might never come about. Would you devote your whole life to a mistaken cause? History never yet hung upon the acts of an individual. The great epochs of a race—the milestones that

mark the way of a nation—they are not within the control of man or woman. Many forces are at work, moulding the shape of every country on this earth, Russia, Sardalia, England,—any nation one might name. The history of the Roman Empire shows a gradual rise, a period of power, and then decline and fall. No one personality can alter the course of a kingdom. Napoleon for a time changed the map of Europe—but for how long? His end came quickly, and the same old boundaries still exist.

“Oliver Cromwell turned England into a commonwealth. But after his death the old institutions claimed their own again. It has been so since the beginning of kings and subjects.” He took both her hands in his. “Don’t make this mistake,” he said. “Don’t cast your wonderful self beneath the wheels of this Juggernaut. As surely as you do, it will crush you as ruthlessly as

any other zealous pilgrim who gives all for the sake of a mistaken ideal."

The Lady listened passively while her lord and master spoke. She said nothing until he had finished. And then she bent her head and pressed her lips to one of the strong hands that held hers and, holding them, seemed to give her strength. Then she looked up at Hubert and he felt, even before she spoke, that his words had had their effect.

"Perhaps you are right, my Hubert. If I were to follow the dictates of my heart it would easy to believe you. But you see, from my earliest childhood, I have been constantly taught that the Czar's wish is sacred. He is the 'Little Father' of all of us Russians, you see, peasant and aristocrat alike. To us he is our country personified. And his word is not only law, but just and divine law—for is he not the head of the Church? He has told me with his own

lips Russia's need of establishing a virtual protectorate over Sardalia—a protectorate which should gather into the fold a little neighbour that would certainly prove very troublesome if left open to the overtures of other nations. It's the 'little foxes,' you remember, 'that destroy the vines.' And as I listened to the 'Little Father' I knew that all he said was true. But then the sacrifice did not mean so much to me.

"Now that you have made a place for yourself in my heart everything is different. Oh! it seems to me, whenever I think of it now, that I could never endure the agony of being mated to that brute Stefan. And that is why I distrust myself when I feel that your arguments are true. How is it possible that these theories that seemed an inseparable part of me should be so easily overthrown by your arguments? How is it possible except that my heart controls

my head? No, I distrust myself. I am afraid that if I went with you I should be playing the traitor not only to my country but to myself as well."

Hubert smiled upon her and kissed away for an instant the hint of a frown that her perplexity placed upon her broad brow.

"How you would delight the old Puritans!" he laughed. "You'd have made a perfectly ripping Round-head."

"Round-head?" she asked him. "And what is that, pray? Something very stupid, I am afraid."

"Not stupid—" Hubert answered. "Just good, you know. We used to have them in England years ago. My ancestors lay exceedingly low when the Round-heads were about. They were very pious people who liked nothing better than removing an enemy's head from his shoulders to the tune of a psalm."

"You must think me a very dangerous person, Mr. Englishman!" the Lady said.

"Oh! I merely meant that your conscience looks askance at pleasant things. Duty in the shape of hardship, or downright pain, bears credentials that satisfy the requirements of your conscience. But duty in the form of pleasure is for you a suspicious character."

"Oh! Tell me truly!" she begged. "I know you want me. I know I want to go away from Sardalia for ever, with you, and never leave your side as long as I live. But is it right? If I thought, in after years, when I looked back upon this day—if I thought I had played the traitor to my country—bartered her safety for my own happiness, I believe that I should die of grief."

Hubert held her trembling body close. It hurt him to see her suffer; he felt that she was greatly torn by her conflicting

emotions, and yet he knew that she had to decide her destiny.

"I think I'm fair," he said slowly. "I do want you, more than anything else in this world. And yet I'd not urge you toward a step that I thought you would regret."

The Lady clasped her white arms round Hubert's neck and it seemed to him that her burning eyes searched his very soul.

"I believe you," she whispered. "Oh! I know you're fine and honest and splendid. I know you'd give up your own happiness—your life if need be—for my sake."

"Yes," Hubert answered, with immense tenderness, "and now I want to devote all the rest of my life to making you happy. I want you to be care-free, always glad that you're alive and always joyful because we found each other before it was too late."

"Oh! I am glad—now, Hubert!" the Lady exclaimed. "And, dearest,"—she held him away from her a second, to see him the better—"I'm always going to be glad, too!"

Her words electrified Hubert.

"You'll come!" he cried. "Oh! you don't know what it means to me! To have you always for my companion—my love—my mate, all my life long!" His delight was too genuine to doubt.

"And you'll never be sorry?" she asked him. "You'll never forget that you're glad—and you'll want always to protect me and cherish me and be good to me—just as much as you do now?"

"Always! I swear it!" Hubert told her. "You will always be sacred in my eyes, and your merest wish shall be a law for me. I'll be your most devoted knight and it will be my dearest pleasure to serve you. And though you'll

not be Queen of Sardalia, you'll be Queen of my heart!"

What avenue of escape seemed best? It was no easy problem—this that confronted these two mad lovers.

The day grew apace. The world was waking. They could hear the changing of the guards on the terrace below and they knew that soon the whole Palace would be astir.

That it was impossible to depart openly they both agreed. Neither doubted that the Crown Prince had already set spies to watch Hubert.

"Of course he'll never dream, however, that you mean to take me away," the Grand Duchess said. "I'm free to leave when and how I please. I must time my going to suit you. You'll need help to escape, for it will be necessary to outwit Stefan's men."

"My man Parkinson will help me,"

Hubert answered. "He's a wonder—that chap. And I'd ask Grenville, too, only I'm afraid it would get him into a frightful row with the War Office. But I think I can do nicely without him." He bent over and kissed the Lady's cheek. "We mustn't stay here any longer," he said. "You can reach me with a message at any time by seeing that it gets safely into my valet's hands. I'll have him look in at the servants' hall now and then, on the chance of one of your maids handing him a note. But trust nothing to any of the royal footmen."

They stood for a few brief seconds, pressed in a passionate embrace.

"It won't be long, my Queen, before I'll hold you in my arms again," Hubert said. "In a little while, only an hour or two, perhaps, I'll have fixed upon a plan, and you shall know at once."

CHAPTER XIII

THE noble boar was spared the spear of Prince Stefan on that memorable morning, for His Highness promptly deserted the hunting party. He had indeed intended to join in the sport—after he had had his amusing *quart d'heure* with Hubert. But in view of the unexpected turn events had taken, the Crown Prince had no stomach for the society of his companions. Shame he had none. But he was always a poor loser—and he could not endure the thought he had been humiliated before all that company. He shrank from tolerating the polite amazement that showed so unmistakably in their faces. And perhaps the hunting-party felt just as much at ease without him.

Once rid of his friends, the Prince went straight to his own apartments. A man-servant sat nodding sleepily in a chair at the entrance. Him the Prince kicked viciously.

"Bring Baron Sarafoff here at once, dog!" he ordered, as the fellow sprang to his feet.

"Yes, yes, Your Highness!" the man stammered, taking himself quickly out of his master's way and disappearing on his errand. He knew royal temper too well to linger.

Stefan stalked into his chambers swearing roundly.

"That old fool Sarafoff!" he exclaimed. "A fine botch he has made of this business! I'll make him smart for his stupidity—the idiotic old bungler! Why, the man is in his dotage! He ought to have been pensioned long ago."

He went to a window and threw open the blind. In the courtyard below he

could see the boar-hunters already mounting their horses and trotting briskly away. He glared at them darkly. "If there had been only one of them, now," he mused, "it would all be simple. A brace of dear subjects might well be spared in a good cause—but there are too many to silence like that . . . I was a fool to take all that tribe along with me."

The royal mood did not improve as the minutes passed and still the Premier failed to answer his summons. Nor did the frequent drinks of brandy that Stefan drained off prove efficacious in cooling his fevered blood or moderating the brutal trend of his thoughts.

He had devised a dozen deaths for Hubert—most of them extremely unpleasant—and had with his own hand shot, stabbed, and strangled him, when at last the Baron's knock startled him from his unholy meditations. Stefan

flung the door open himself and scowled a dark greeting at his grizzled visitor.

Baron Sarafoff had not been Prime Minister of Sardalia for towards two score years to be either surprised or dismayed by any summons that might come to him from one of the royal house.

"Good-morning — your Highness!" He greeted the Crown Prince with great affability—the greater since he immediately guessed, from all the visible indications of the Prince's displeasure, that his little ruse intended for Hubert's confounding had in some way miscarried.

"Ah! brandy!" he exclaimed pleasantly, as he placed his hat upon the table and saw the decanter standing there.

"This is thoughtful of you—very"—and he poured a glassful for himself.

"Your good health!" he said, as he raised the glass. "Yours and the charming Crown Princess'-to-be!" and he drank the toast with relish.

"Pour yourself another glass!" said the Crown Prince bitterly. "You may as well drink the health of Mr. Hubert Aldringham—his and his mistress!"

"Ah-h! the little Mitzi!" The Prime Minister looked at Stefan quickly.

"No, not Mitzi," the Crown Prince corrected him. "The charming Crown Princess-to-be!"

"The devil!" old Sarafoff said. "What do you mean? Out with it! What of our little plan of last night?"

"*Your* little plan, if you please," the Crown Prince emended his question. And then he could contain his rage no longer. "Your plan! Your fool's scheme!" he cried. "You ought to be drawn and quartered for ever suggesting such an impossible undertaking." And he stared malevolently at his aged mentor as if he would himself find great joy in serving the old man up to the vultures.

"Come! come! Explain yourself," the Premier said evenly. "One must have patience. It is not always that one succeeds at the first trial. If the design failed we'll formulate another."

"No, thanks!" Stefan sneered. "I'll have no more of your silly schemes. Stick to your chess-board, if you still want to test your skill as a tactician. I'm through with your absurd manoeuvres. You've used me for a pawn for the last time."

The Baron's fund of patience was inexhaustible. He received the Prince's scathing sally with the utmost good-nature.

"Pray be more explicit," he said quietly. "Just what is the difficulty?"

"The difficulty!" Stefan exclaimed hotly. "The fat's all in the fire. . . . Curse you!" he cried, "you sit there calmly and ask me that question as if you were master of the situation.

This has gone beyond any help from you."

"The point—come to the point—I beg," said the suave old Sardalian statesman.

"Well—here it is, then." The Crown Prince turned upon him like a wild beast at bay. "We went to the breakfast room, Petkoff, Von Kallay, and all the rest—the Englishman Roslyn was with us too. And we found Aldringham—we found him with the Grand Duchess Sonia!"

"God forbid!" the Premier exclaimed piously. "There must be some mistake. Are you sure of what you say?" Incredulity was writ large upon his countenance.

"Sure? sure?" the Crown Prince laughed madly. "I tell you we caught them there together. Petkoff pulled back the curtain and the room was light

as day. I should say there *was* a mistake!"

"Incredible!" the old minister murmured. "Where, pray, was that wench Mitzi? What was she doing?"

"Ah! where indeed? You may well ask. I've not seen her and if I know her she's miles away from here by this time. Whatever may have happened, you may be sure she would look out for her own skin. Trust a woman for that!"

And Stefan was right. He never saw his little friend Mitzi again.

"A pretty state of affairs you have brought about," he continued.

"Nay—nay," the old man said, and there was a strange note of resignation in his voice.

"It's Fate, Stefan, Fate that has beaten us. Some mysterious agency mightier than we stepped in and balked us."

"A good excuse—that!" the Crown

Prince said ironically. "A fine old woman's reason for the failure of a badly managed business." He paused in his restless pacing of the floor and leaning both hands upon the table stood glowering at his baffled accomplice.

"Fatalism has no place in my creed," he declared. "In this whole world there's just one predestined event to which I will subscribe."

"And that—?" Baron Sarafoff looked up at him curiously.

"Is Aldringham's sudden death," Stefan said fiercely.

The old Premier frowned.

"Impossible!" he declared. "It's not to be thought of—not for a moment. Would you deliberately call the Powers down upon you? They'd come, quickly, like the ravening pack of wolves that they are, always waiting just beyond—just beyond in the shadow of the future—ready to-morrow, if the opportunity should

come, to hurl their troops into the Balkans and plunge the whole of Europe into the greatest conflict the world has ever seen."

"Nonsense!" Stefan cried disdainfully. "For God's sake forget this nightmare that my father and you are always dreaming. What's a puppy like this Aldringham to England? There are a thousand like him ready and waiting to fill his shoes. I tell you, this time I'll have my own way. There'll be no more dilly-dallying. I'll conduct this affair myself from now on. Things would never have happened as they have if I had had sense enough to have my own way before. Lord! what a fool I was to listen to you!"

Baron Sarafoff experienced a growing alarm at the possible result of the Crown Prince's headstrong passion. But the old veteran knew better than to let the Prince see that he was troubled.

"Well! well!" he said at length. "What do you purpose doing?"

Prince Stefan jeered openly at the old man.

"Do you think I'm such a fool as to tell you anything of my intentions?" he asked. "I've had too much of your meddling already. See what you've brought upon me! Through your crass stupidity I've become overnight the laughing-stock of the whole country. You know how such news spreads. In a week the story of this night's happenings will be told—yes and laughed at, too—in every club on the Continent. Wherever I go, men will nudge one another and smile in their sleeves because the honour of the Crown Prince of Sardalia was betrayed under his very nose, in the Royal Palace, by an interloping British attaché! Oh! it's an amusing story!"

"Don't be hasty," was the Baron's warning. "I'm sure that when the stress of

the moment has passed you'll see the matter in a different light. After all—what proof has any one—what proof have you—that everything was not as it should be? More than one enamoured couple has out-sat the time-limits of perfect propriety. But that does not signify.”

But Baron Sarafoff's plausible efforts to gloss over the affair had no mollifying effect upon the Crown Prince. Or, to state the case differently—the more the Baron tried to placate Stefan the more keenly did he suffer from the enormous wound his vanity had received.

His Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Sardalia was far from being a complex character. Quite to the contrary, his was pre-eminently a simple nature. No mixed emotions came crowding in confusedly upon him. No pang of sorrow for what he firmly believed to be the faithlessness of his official lady-love mingled with the stings of his injured

dignity. He had received an unpardonable affront and the man who had so offended him must suffer. So must the woman—but, ah! that was a different matter. That score would be paid all in good time.

The Premier saw that for the present his advice was futile. And bidding the Crown Prince good-morning, he left the royal heir to his ragings, and the brandy-bottle.

But Baron Sarafoff had no intention of dropping the affair. The old watch-dog was too vigilant for that. This Aldringham should be recalled, at the request of the Sardalian Government, and as quickly as the wires could carry the request to London and bring back the order to Hubert, that troublesome young gentleman should be spirited out of the country.

But for once the wily Baron underestimated the proximity of the gathering storm.

All that day the Crown Prince stayed in the seclusion of his apartments. At luncheon he entertained his bosom companions, Lieutenant Petkoff and Count Von Kallay, who had by that time returned from the boar-hunt. But to all the other guests he remained invisible.

Not long before this very select company had sat down to the Prince's private table, Baron Sarafoff was whisked down the drive behind a spanking pair of Russians. The old Premier was already started on his way to the capital to carry out his project.

And as he sat, later, in the railway-carriage and smoked his fat cigarettes he felt quite contented with life and with himself. For was he not conscious of much work well done by him? And was he not—as ever—successfully matching his nimble wits with the best? And he could already hear, in his imagination, the com-

pliments of the King upon the little *coup d'état* that he was about to execute.

Truly, the life of a diplomat was not without its reward!

Meanwhile, in the Crown Prince's apartment, Fate still shaped her instruments toward the thwarting of the Baron's design.

There was work for Von Kallay and Petkoff to do. They must pay with what they had to give, for the favours that they had received. The very meat they ate—the wine they drank—it must all be paid for. And the balance loomed heavy against them. But they knew that one night's work with their butchers' hands would turn the score in their favour. A promised land of even greater plenty lay just beyond.

CHAPTER XIV

MANY plans involving Hubert were formulated on that eventful day. And those of the Crown Prince and of Baron Saraffoff were not the only ones. Hubert was himself devising a course of action that did not at all coincide with the project of either of the others.

Fortunately he possessed the sinews of war in the shape of a letter of credit, which would yield him immediate funds in any of the larger European cities. And for his present needs he had enough in gold and bank-notes to take him with his bride-to-be well out of Balkan territory.

Hubert knew that they must lose no time in making their escape. The more practicable way, he was convinced, would be to leave the Palace in the daytime.

And setting his wits to work he soon evolved a scheme that struck him as feasible in every detail.

As Prince Stefan and his two interesting companions clinked numerous glasses to the success of their enterprise, Hubert's man Parkinson placed safely in the hands of the Grand Duchess' most trusted maid a letter from his master. And in a few minutes more the Lady read the message. There was no superscription, nor any signature.

"Go for a ride late this afternoon, leaving the Palace at four o'clock, and taking only your man-servant Dmitry as an attendant. Send word to the Equerry at once that you wish the two new Arabians reserved for your use to-day. They are the fastest horses in the royal stables.

"Take the road you followed on a certain occasion and keep to it until you reach the old stone bridge. Then turn off to the right and ride straight on until you come to the edge

of the forest. I'll be waiting for you there. It's a lonely spot and outside the royal preserve. No one from the Palace ever goes there, they say. We'll have a glorious gallop through the forest. It will be dark when we reach the little town called Ropitza in time to take the Austrian Express.

"I shall slip away from the Palace on foot an hour or more before you leave. If any one is curious enough to take notice of my movements he will think I am going for a walk over the hills. Well! so I am. But I'll get a mount at the training stables down by the river.

"Send me some message so I may know that all is well."

And Hubert did not have long to wait before a little note was brought to him.

"Yes—dear one—all is well—now. But be careful, I beg you. Look back often when you are alone in this sparsely settled district. And if certain of our acquaintances should pass you on the road—if you love me, beware

of an ambush. I know the customs of the country only too well. Until—*then!*”

Hubert pressed the paper to his lips. In a few short hours, now, they would be together!—together for years and years—together till Death parted them! And a thrill of more than human rapture possessed his spirit at the thought. Until now—until he held her letter as a tangible token of the reality of her acceptance, a vague misgiving had obsessed him. Somehow the whole affair had lacked the stamp of actuality. But now high hope filled his whole being with a fierce *élan*.

The afternoon sun, dropping to kiss the western mountain-top that lifted its head high as if eager to receive the caress, sent slanting rays filtering through the forest-branches.

Hubert had reached the rendezvous without mishap. For a little time—for

he was early—he waited restlessly. His horse he tied behind a convenient clump of young larches and choosing a jutting angle of the bank that overhung the grass-grown road, he stationed himself behind a screen of scrubby growth. This vantage spot afforded him a view of the road in both directions.

And as he watched—what was it that suddenly entered the narrowing vista and disturbed the quiet of the picture?

The Arabians were white—or one of them, at least—and these horses (there were two of them) that drew near so rapidly—they were clearly of a duller hue.

Hubert drew out his revolver and crouched lower. He wished that he had tied his coat over his horse's nose. If the brute should neigh when it heard the quick hoof-beats passing, a devilishly awkward situation might develop. Who could be riding this way at that pace? He wondered mightily.

And then his straining eyes distinguished a woman's habit fluttering from one of the animals. And shortly he sprang from his cover and leaped into the road, for he saw that—after all—it was his Lady. The Grand Duchess and the man Dmitry quickly pulled in their straining mounts. The man jumped down quickly and stood with a hand at the head of his mistress' horse.

"I want to dismount," she said, and Hubert helped her, rejoicing that he could once more feel her hand in his. As he held her for an instant in his arms the illumination of love softened the strong man-lines set about his mouth.

"I thought you were never coming—never coming!" he cried impetuously.

After that first embrace his Queen held him at arm's length. She wanted to look at him, to be sure of him, because she was thinking more deeply and more intensely than most women think.

"Tell me you love me—tell me!" Hubert said with a sudden vehemence that might have made her half afraid. But the Lady showed no fear.

"Yes, I love you," she said—"I love you, and I shall always love you!"

She was pale, her cheeks and a glimpse of low forehead showing between the loose strands of centre-parted hair were creamily and purely pale.

To Hubert she seemed lovelier than ever. And a feeling of immense tenderness swept over him, and a passionate desire to shield her from all harm. Yes—there was no danger—no earthly peril, that he would not gladly face for her sake, because he loved her as a young man is destined to love just one woman out of the whole world of other women.

She slipped her arm through Hubert's.

"Come!" she said, "there are some things that I—that I—must tell you." She stopped and patted the satin neck of

the animal she had ridden. "I could not get the Arabians," she explained to Hubert. "They were already spoken for. But these are almost as good."

And then she drew her lover aside at a little distance. For a brief minute she said nothing—but her eyes drank in thirstily the love-light that burned in his. And Hubert was supremely happy then, as he stood there silently with this slender, dark-haired woman, who—to him—represented the happy legion of the All-Desired.

"Hubert—Loved One!" she said at last. "I have come—"

"Yes, yes! Oh! I was sure you would!" he told her joyfully.

But in her face there shone none of the gladness that made Hubert's radiant.

"Dearest!" she said, "I'm going to hurt you frightfully, I know. Oh! I know! for is not my own heart breaking? I've come—to tell you that I cannot go! I

cannot betray my trust!" And she buried her dear head upon his shoulder, as her whole body shook in the grip of her great emotion.

This was Life!

CHAPTER XV

AT first Hubert was too stunned to speak. He could only hold his Love as she lay in his arms, convulsively racked by great silent, tearless sobs of grief.

He looked down at her—at first pityingly, then wonderingly, then passionately.

He had loved her! God! he had loved her so much, and planned for her, and waited for her—only for this!

It was madness, some distorted idea of conscience which love's ardour, love's unyielding demand could disperse.

He would lift her face to his and cover her lips with kisses and crush her slim, girlish form to his heart, and then all those fantastic superstitions would be dispelled.

"You are saying what you don't mean, my dear!" he cried. "This is just a nervous collapse. You have been under too great a strain. Our love is too real and close a thing for you to let it go by for the sake of some mythical ghost of honour. Sonia! Sonia!" And with the last call upon her name, his arms opened and then closed more firmly around the slim grace of her girlish figure, while hungrily, eagerly, insistently his lips sought to find her own.

He would not be cheated out of the woman whom he wanted, and longed for, and loved.

"Darling! darling!" Twice he said it, then the search for her lips was over. He had found that little mouth that had so often returned the pressure of his—he would kiss her now, again and again and again—until . . .

"You will never kiss me again," she said. "These few days I have been half

mad, and now I am sane—or perhaps it may be that I have been sane and now I am half mad! I don't know which way it is—I only know that I want you to forgive me!”

“Forgive you! forgive you!” said Hubert gently. “My darling! there is nothing to forgive.” He patted her shoulder soothingly. “Don't feel badly,” he whispered. “Though there be none to hear, that is ever a lover's way. “You've been too much alone to-day,” he continued. “But thank God I'll always be near you now, to comfort you when you're sad and troubled, and to rejoice with you when you're happy.”

“No! no!” she answered. “That can never be, Hubert. “I've thought it all out, alone, and I know that if I forsook my duty to my country and the Czar I should know nothing but remorse my life long. Oh! it's hard! hard! But I was brought into the world for this purpose.

It is written down in the Book of Life that I shall marry Stefan and so save my country—my own people—from pain and suffering and sorrow. It should be—oh! it is, my pride and my glory that I can do this thing for the Empire. But alas! it is also my cross!”

Hubert found himself at a loss for words. For a time he could only try in his man’s way to comfort her. He kissed her again and again and wished that he might have the good fortune to meet the Crown Prince as man to man. For was not that devil the direct instrument of her torture?

How could he leave her here, to endure the taunts—yes, and the physical abuse to which he knew, too well, she would be subjected? Oh! it was incredible that this was the same bright world of a short half-hour ago. Then the fresh-tinted and chill-breezed day had helped impart to him a sensation of invigorated

hope. But now, with the fading light, the very earth seemed dying. And a deep despair came over him.

“How can I leave you! How can I leave you!” he groaned. “And yet I cannot urge you now. I know you have been fighting this battle with yourself all day.”

“Yes—yes!” she said sadly. “And sometimes my longing to be with you almost made me belittle every consideration except our happiness—yours and mine. But in the end I saw it all clearly. I’ll always thank God that I saw in time. And—oh! my lover! I’ll always thank God for you, too—for having sent you into my life!”

He was looking at her almost sadly. There seemed so much of tender, sweet, beautiful womanhood being wasted here. A divine friend, a perfect wife, an ideal mother! How exquisitely she would grace any of these *rôles!*

But he knew now—alas! that he would

play no further part upon her Stage of Life. Their too short Drama was almost at an end.

"Hubert!" she asked, "will you always remember me?"

"Always—always—how could I ever forget you?" was his half-questioning answer.

She clung to him with all the fictitious strength of her despair.

"It's *you* I love," she breathed—"not only your physical being, but you, all the best of you! Love is something which reaches beyond the material—it goes in a straight line to the spirit,—I feel it. I know it."

So it was nearly finished between those two sad young lovers. Nearly finished—yes—as the unfeeling world regards such partings. But you and I—you who read, and I—know that there are some ties that mere physical parting cannot sever. And

there, in the fast gathering twilight, they stood clasped in each other's arms.

"You must catch the train at Ropitza," she said at last, brokenly. "It is dangerous for you to stay in this country any longer. Stefan would never rest until he took revenge on you. But once away from here—once safe in England, at all events, I feel sure he could not harm you."

"No! no!" Hubert said. "Not now! I cannot go yet. In a day or two, perhaps—yes. But not while you remain here!"

"In a day or two it would be too late," and she shuddered as she spoke. "As you love me—go now. You'll hardly be out of the forest before the dark overtakes you. And the moon will not rise for three hours yet."

But what lover would not have lingered?

"You must go—you must go now!" she

said. "You must surely reach the railway while there is yet time." The anxiety in her voice and face was unmistakable. "Don't make it harder for me," she said.

And that appeal persuaded Hubert as no other could have. Make it harder for her! Did he not desire passionately to make all things easy for her! Was it not his dearest wish to anticipate her every want—and to relieve her of all her burdens? To make the rough places smooth? Should he then fail her in this one—the only thing he could do to lessen her present anxiety?

"My Queen!" he murmured, "I yield to your will. But I cannot think that we'll not meet again." And he looked at her still hopefully.

"You must send me some message," she said evasively. For she knew well that it was the last time she would ever see him. "Oh! let me know soon that you are safe!

I shall not have a minute's peace until I know."

"I will," he promised.

And she smiled bravely at him as they walked slowly back to where the horses stood.

She smiled bravely, though her heart was weeping.

And Hubert, as his horse carried him on into the dimming forest, looked back and saw her standing there. She waved her hand to him once. And then the drooping foliage hid her from his view for ever.

It was one of those things which must be!

CHAPTER XVI

ON, on into the forest Hubert rode. But all his thoughts were of his Love. He had left his heart behind him. And every instant he was being borne further and further away from that which was dearest to him.

There was something depressing in the dark shadows of the wood. It seemed to Hubert that the great frond-like branches drooped disconsolately, as if even the trees were heavy-hearted.

He wondered when he should see the Grand Duchess again. For in his young heart all hope was not yet dead. Optimism is too essentially a part of the philosophy of youth to be entirely stifled. It is only long experience of life that permits us to recognise defeat. Resignation

comes only in the wake of many disappointments.

And to Hubert this was the first intimation that man is not always master of his fate. It was his first taste of the bitterness of the inevitable.

After a time he came into a stretch of more open country. He was approaching a ravine—once the course of some mighty river—of which there remained only a tiny, purling brook to pick its way in and out along the rock-strewn gorge.

Hubert took little note of his surroundings. His thoughts, as I have said, dwelt lover-wise upon the girl he had left behind.

He had checked his horse to a slower pace as he began to descend the sharp declivity that led to the bottom of the gulch. For a moment, one last soft glow of light, reflected from some low-hanging clouds in the west, the final vestige of the already sunken sun, outlined him clearly as he

hung for a fleeting instant on the brink of the descent. A few minutes later his horse's hoofs beat a muffled tattoo upon the crude bridge that spanned the stream.

Hubert had scarcely reached the earthen road again when a weird cry broke sharply upon the still air. It seemed to come from behind him—a long quivering wail. The unexpectedness of the call startled him. But he immediately scoffed at himself. It was nothing but an owl, he was sure. But the sound had served to divert his mind from its preoccupied musing, and concentrate his attention upon the lonely road. With a light touch of the spur, he set his mount at the short, steep climb ahead. The horse scrambled quickly up the bank, and then, just as the trees resumed their sentry-like guard of the road—for the forest grew again at the edge of the vanished river—Hubert saw a sudden jet of flame leap out from the darkness ahead. Even

before the vicious crack of a rifle reached his ears he felt a quick scorching along his left fore-arm.

An ambush! That explained the owl-like screech. It was a signal of his coming—sent by some watcher stationed along the way.

The echo of the report had not ceased roaring up and down the little valley before Hubert had slipped from his saddle and dragging his snorting horse after him plunged into the thick growth that fringed the road.

He had no inclination for riding rashly up to the spot where lay the hidden marksman. A solitary death in that lonely place did not appeal to him. In the half-light that now filtered down to the ribbon of road that wound its way through the wood he knew he must offer a very satisfactory mark.

But buried there in the thicket he felt that he had any prowling enemy at a dis-

advantage. And he drew out his revolver and looked at its chambers. In his present position he felt sure he could give a good account of himself.

Then the sensation of something warm upon his hand reminded him that he had been touched.

His arm was not bleeding much—it seemed hardly more than scratched—but his coat-sleeve was torn to tatters. He hastily tied a handkerchief about the wound. And then there was nothing to do but wait. With one hand he held his horse's head with a tight rein, to keep the animal from tearing at the green leaves that hung tantalisingly before his very nose. Hubert knew that his enemies would riddle the thicket with bullets if they saw the branches waving.

So he waited, with eyes and ears alert, for perhaps a quarter of an hour—it seemed to Hubert much longer. The night was closing in rapidly. Pulling

out his watch, he managed to see the position of the hands indistinctly; it was nearly eight o'clock. Every minute that he stayed there made his chance of getting the Express the more remote. But he knew it would be folly to venture into the road until it was quite dark.

As the dragging time wore on there seemed to be no movement on the part of the besiegers. They too were evidently playing a waiting game.

At last all was buried in inky blackness. Hubert thanked heaven that the moon rose late. There must be stars in plenty but their scanty rays made no impression upon that Stygian darkness. He led his horse carefully out upon the road. The beast made an infernal noise—or so it seemed to Hubert's keenly-set ears.

It was lighter out there. He could see the road indistinctly, as a brown blur that merged into black a dozen feet away from him.

Well! there was nothing to do now but to make a run for it and trust to luck to get past that hidden rifle-man.

He mounted, and his willing horse, still fresh, jumped under the spur like a steeple-chaser. Hubert made no attempt to guide him after that first leap, but breathed something like a prayer that the beast might keep his feet.

He held his cocked revolver ready to shoot at the flame he expected every instant to come spurting out at him.

It seemed an eternity to Hubert before that tongue of fire licked viciously from the roadside. But the inevitable happened. This time he was so close that the flame and the roar came almost together. Hubert fired straight at that shining mark—it was just abreast of him. And then his horse swayed sharply and almost pitched his rider headlong.

Hubert's first thought was that the brute had been hit, but the way he set-

tled into his stride again and fairly ate up the road was reassuring.

Then a fusillade of shots came tearing out of the darkness behind, and Hubert heard more than one bullet sing its sinister song as it passed above him. He turned in his saddle and emptied his revolver, hoping that some random bullet would find a mark.

As his horse tore on faster and faster the feel of the splendid live thing extending itself beneath him gave him a strange reckless delight. He reloaded his weapon exultantly and awaited a repetition of his enemy's fire.

Then his horse, losing the hard path, ran for a few yards upon the turf that edged the road. The soft footing muffled the sound of his hoof-beats and in that brief interim Hubert's ear caught the rapid clattering of another horse, running at a furious pace along the hidden road.

In that uncanny setting, the machine-like rhythm of those whirl-wind feet sounded weirdly unreal. It occurred to Hubert that it was curiously like the old theatrical trick of imitating the arrival of a rider off-stage. And by Jove! this rider was certainly arriving, too, at a great rate. Although his own horse had found the road again he could still hear that pursuing rat-tat, constantly growing louder and louder, like the roll of an approaching drum.

He spoke a word of encouragement to his mount and gave him the spur again, but the horse was plainly doing all he knew. Hubert would not punish the willing animal. He still had his revolver, and in a running fight under such conditions he asked no odds.

As he turned then to strain his eyes in a vain effort at piercing the pall-like darkness—for it was instinctive that he should try to see his enemy—he received

a stinging cut across the cheek, and felt the sweep of some yielding mass across his head. It was only a low-hanging bough, but it served as a warning to Hubert to bend low over his horse's neck. And so he rode, while those thundering hoof-beats grew louder and louder. They could not now be far behind.

Riding low as he was, he was sensible of the thump and drag of another limb as it brushed across his shoulders. Ah! that one would have unseated him had he not been crouched over his horse's withers!

He had hardly congratulated himself over his escape when he heard a shout, followed by a confused cursing in the language of the country.

Hubert laughed aloud. At least one of his pursuers was disposed of, for it was evident that the sagging branch had done its work. And if there were more they must be some distance in the rear.

But still that demon horse drew nearer and nearer. It must be almost upon him. And looking round cautiously, Hubert saw an indistinct pale patch close behind him. He threw up his revolver to fire, but some impulse stayed his finger.

A moment later Hubert laughed again, for a riderless white horse drew up alongside his own. He put out his hand and grasped a rein. And so, for a time, they went bounding on.

Came then a sudden ascent in the road. It proved the beginning of a long hill, but still the mad race continued. Toward the top of the steep grade Hubert felt that the horse he rode was tiring, and by the time they had gained the top the poor brute was quite blown.

He pulled both animals down to a walk. Listening intently, he could hear no sounds of pursuit, and coming to a halt he dismounted. Clearly, he was in

luck, to have a re-mount sent to him providentially out of the night. The white horse showed no signs of distress and examining him superficially as best he could in the darkness Hubert guessed that it was one of the Arabians from the royal stud.

But he suddenly cut short his cursory inspection of his find; for in the distance he heard once more the tell-tale patter of swiftly-striking hoofs. He threw himself into the saddle and immediately the white horse was off like a shot. When he felt the elastic stride of the animal under him Hubert was certain that it was the King's white Arab. He knew this was the speedier of the two—faster than his chestnut mate—and that throughout the countryside there was not his match in a long distance race. Well! he would let the fellow show what he could do—for there was still the Express to be caught. Hubert had no

thought that his pursuer could overtake him on the road—but what if the train were late and he had to wait at the railway-station? Perhaps the man might come upon him there. He would have to trust to luck to take care of that.

His former mount, relieved of his burden, seemed to recover some of his dampened spirits, for he followed for a time close at the heels of the Arab as down the hill they flew.

Soon they emerged from the forest, upon the gently sloping plain that led down to the bottom of the valley in which lay the sleepy little hamlet of Ropitza.

And now upon the comparatively level road Hubert gave his eager steed his head. It seemed to him that far up the valley he caught the merest suspicion of a glimmer now and then. The distance was too great for any peasant's light to send its feeble rays. It must

come from the head-light of a locomotive.

Hubert spoke sharply to his Arab, which seemed to have always something in reserve, and his own riderless horse was soon left far behind as he raced the Express into the village.

He reached the little town in the nick of time. Ordinarily hamlets of its diminutive size were not honoured by any but local trains stopping at their small stations. But Ropitza was fortunate in being a point where the engine drivers on the expresses were forced to stop to water their puffing charges. Hubert knew this fact, and counted the slight delay involved as a factor in his favour.

He tied his horse hastily at the rail behind the barn-like structure that served as a station and ran around to the platform where a guard stood waiting to give the signal to the driver to go ahead.

Hubert pressed a gold coin into the hand of the uniformed station-chief.

"The horse I left back there—" he said, pointing to the rear of the building, "please have the goodness to send it to the Summer Palace to-morrow." And without further words with the man he swung onto the steps just as the train began to move.

In an hour he would be safely outside the little Kingdom of Sardalia. It was true that there remained still the danger that the train would be flagged at some small station and that he would be dragged from the car. But even if such orders were telegraphed ahead he doubted that the guards would dare detain him. In his pocket he carried his commission, and he felt fairly confident that its imposing seals would go far toward intimidating any troublesome railway-officials.

But as it turned out, no further effort

was made to apprehend him. Probably the Crown Prince wished to leave no public traces of Hubert's sudden demise—an event which failed to take place according to the royal programme.

As he reflected upon the events of that night, Hubert felt sorry, in spite of himself, for the chap who had given him that scratch upon the arm. When Stefan learned of his bad marksmanship the poor fellow would be in for a very bad quarter of an hour.

As the heavy train rumbled and swayed over the wretchedly laid line, Hubert's elation over the outcome of the evening's adventure gave way to an overpowering melancholy. He had escaped, it was true—but to what purpose? Was it only to live out the half-rounded life of a man without his mate—without the one woman created for him? Would it not have been better, after all, if one of those singing bullets had gone home?

To-morrow he would reach Vienna—where he had once hoped to spend his honeymoon. And what a difference there would be now! His heart grew heavy at the thought.

And to-morrow was coming soon!

CHAPTER XVII

THE world never looked quite the same same to Hubert again.

We all know the intense, vivid green of the English fields and hedgerows, and the crisp blueness of English skies in fair weather—*blue fire*, Ruskin called it—that dazzling azure, set off with great white billowy mountains of cumulus clouds. But Hubert's eyes never saw again the same brilliance in Nature's coloring. For him the whole aspect of the earth and the earth's life had changed. He found the universe still beautiful—it is true—but it was a beauty of a subdued sort. His great unhappiness had dimmed the brightness of mundane things.

Happiness! How amazingly wonder-

ful it would be to know happiness again!

Immediately upon his arrival in London, a fortnight after he had left Sardinia, Hubert went to his uncle, Sir Rufus Aldringham, and made a clean breast of the whole affair.

He did not—we may be sure—give a detailed recital of the more tender passages of his epic. What man makes a confidant of one of his own sex when genuine affairs of the heart are involved? But he contrived to convey to Sir Rufus a very clear impression of the events that had taken place.

Hubert did not find a captious critic in his uncle. On the contrary, the old gentleman proved to be an exceedingly sympathetic listener. Although his nephew did not suspect it (such are the unseeing eyes with which the young—always unimaginative where their elders are concerned—are wont to regard the

old) Sir Rufus had not passed his early life unscathed by the flames of the tender passion. His own apprenticeship in the art of diplomacy had taught him that strange adventures often await the impressionable young attaché in foreign lands.

Until he heard Hubert's story the good man had had no inkling of the affair. Inquiry among his subordinates subsequently brought to light the fact that upon the date of Hubert's escape a telegraphic message had been received from the Sardalian capital. But its meaning was indecipherable. The sender—there was no clue to his identity—had apparently made use of a secret code to which there was no key in the British Foreign Office. Neither the purport of the message, nor its unknown author, was ever discovered.

"Well! my boy," said Sir Rufus, after Hubert had finished his tale, "this is an

unfortunate turn of events—to be sure. But as for any international entanglement—I think we may consider the danger as negligible. I appreciate your frankness in telling me the story at once—but it is no more than I should have expected from my brother's son.”

“Thank you! sir—thank you!” said Hubert, somewhat brokenly. Now that he had related the incidents of those memorable days he began to experience a reaction that stirred him to the very core.

“All this that you have said here shall go no further, Hubert,” Sir Rufus continued. “Certainly your mother and Henrietta must know nothing of what has happened. They would never understand. And I do not really see that it could serve any purpose to tell even your father. So far as I am concerned, the outcome of your adventure might have been much worse. As it is, we have

you still with us, thank God!" For an Englishman of the old school Sir Rufus allowed himself a surprising show of affection. But as one grows older there seems a less valid reason for the rigorous concealment of all one's feelings.

Hubert regarded his uncle with grateful eyes.

"You are very good," he said, "very kind to take this view of the case."

"Not at all, my boy! Not at all!" the elder man said bluffly. "See here! Come to me whenever you are troubled by this matter. I was young once myself—don't forget that, Hubert. And I realise there are times when a chap needs advice and—er—er—all that sort of thing, you know."

Hubert thanked him again.

"Of course," his uncle explained, "your Eastern mission is at an end. But don't be disheartened by that. Your family are coming up to town next week

for the season. Stay in London for a time. See people. Go to dinners and dances and garden-parties. Do you good, you know. Get your mind off this—er—this memory of yours. And then come up to my place in Scotland and try the shooting for a month. I'll guarantee that by that time you'll be keen for another berth somewhere. There's going to be an upset in some of our South American legations. Just the thing for you! Now take my advice—and don't forget, my boy! You're to come straight to me whenever you're disturbed by anything!"

And as Hubert went out and made his way along the passage he felt that he had at least found a new friend. Heretofore he had always looked upon his Uncle Rufus as a stuffy old fuss-and-feathers—but by Gad! the dear old chap was a trump!

But he did not think long about his

Uncle Rufus. Go where he would, he saw everywhere the pale face of his Lady. He saw her white face, with its red lips, and eyes that looked a thousand unsaid tender words.

In Vienna Hubert had posted a letter addressed to the Grand Duchess Sonia in St. Petersburg. He had sent another from Paris, and one from London. But from her he had received never a word.

A week had passed since he reached London, and then another, and another. But still she had given him no sign. The days dragged slowly on. And the nights! oh! the interminable nights! Each one of them, Hubert thought, would never end.

He realised, however, the wisdom of his Uncle Rufus' advice. He knew that he must not lose his grip on himself. He owed it to his Love to be brave in

the face of sorrow. But it was hard—it was frightfully hard.

Everywhere he went he had to stand up under a running fire of questions about Sardalia. He had to smile and answer his friends' queries, and all the time he was writhing mentally under the pain of his distress—like a great gaping wound it was, hidden beneath the cheerful cloak of his dissembling.

All this time the anguish and suspense of waiting for some message from his loved one were increasing daily, until the burden of his grief had grown so heavy that only utter hopelessness seemed to be in store for him.

At last, one night when his despondency had driven him away early from a dance, he dragged himself home—walking all the way—and sought the seclusion of his own small sitting-room. As he entered he saw a dozen letters lying on his writing-desk, but for once he did

not seize them eagerly in the hope that one would bear a Russian postmark. No! he had been disappointed too often. His immense desire should not cheat him again. He knew without looking that there was nothing there except an invitation to a dinner here, and a ball there, or one of those stupid teas, and perhaps a gushing note from some silly girl who would come as near making love as she dared.

So without examining the letters Hubert passed on into his bed-chamber. It was not late—far too early to turn in. The sleepless nights that he invariably spent now—sleepless except for occasional fitful dozing—made him loathe the thought of his comfortable bed. He slipped off his evening coat to don a smoking-jacket, and returning to his sitting-room searched among his books for something that would give him at least a partial respite from his ever-present

gnawing sorrow. He had not looked far when an old boyhood fancy caught his eye. It was *Huckleberry Finn*, that delightful story by the great humorist Mark Twain, beloved of the English as well as of his own American fellow-countrymen. Hubert drew the well-worn volume from its shelf and looked at it affectionately. He could never experience the same delight in it again, he knew—but he felt that like some staunch old friend it would give him what comfort it could.

He pulled an arm-chair up to the light, and then looked about for his favourite pipe. Ah! there it lay, on the desk. And his eye fell upon the neglected mail. He picked up the letters and idly tossed them one by one upon the desk again, as he read the addresses.

And then he felt a sudden thrill as he stared fixedly at a large square envelope addressed in a quaintly foreign hand.

And the stamp! Yes that was surely the Russian stamp! Hubert tore open the envelope with trembling hands. At last! Oh! God, at last!

And this is what he read:

"Did you think I had forgotten, Dearly Beloved? I could not write sooner, my Hubert, for I have been very ill. I had to struggle frightfully with myself to make you go without me. And after you had gone, I felt as if I should die of grief.

"There was the suspense, too, of not knowing whether you were safe. I shall never forget that night. I could not shake off a terrible conviction that told me you were in peril. The next morning—the morning after you went away, Dmitry rode all the way to Ropitza to make inquiries about you. He learned from the man at the station that an Englishman had taken the train there the previous night, leaving his horse in the man's charge, and directing him to send it to the Palace. But not ten minutes after the

Express had left a Sardalian officer appeared upon the scene who swore at him very unpleasantly, when he saw the animal tied there, and led it away with him.

"That was Lieutenant Petkoff, Dmitry learned.

"Oh! my Beautiful Lover, you can imagine my relief when Dmitry came back and told me. But not until they gave me your letters—all three together, for it was only two days ago that they would let me have them—not until then did I learn just what had happened after you left me and rode away into the forest.

"Now that I know you are safe at home again I can look at things in a different light. As I lie here quietly I put my hand out and touch your letters; they seem a part of you, and I feel that you are near. They are the only tangible tokens I have that come from you—but oh! my sweet Hubert! I guard in my heart those more lasting mementos of the soul which no one can ever take from me.

"I know now that it is better that I stayed behind. It was hard—and it will yet be even

harder. But I can endure it. After all, I cannot live for ever—and I still hope for a hereafter. God grant that I may see you then, my Hubert; for we shall never behold each other again in this world!

"We must not meet here again. Even to venture near me would be a matter of life and death for you. And I do not know how strong I am. I dare not see you, Hubert. I could never again fight as I have fought against myself.

"So you must be brave for both of us. You must be steadfast. No matter how clear the call to come, you must shut your ears to it.

"Oh, Hubert! don't forget me too soon! I know you will always keep a place for me in your heart, but you are young—and one day some sweet girl will help you to forget this pain. I hate the thought—and yet I would not have it otherwise.

"Be happy—be brave and happy, my Beloved One! And know that I am, and always shall be, wholly yours."

As Hubert turned to the final page, a paper fluttered to the floor. Her photograph! It was just a little picture, taken by some amateur, but Hubert held it as if it were a priceless miniature done by some great artist. The little informal portrait brought to him a sense of intimacy with his Lady,—it conveyed to him a feeling of her loving reality.

And then Hubert read her letter again. To the very last word he read once more, and now when he looked at her dear face again there was a brilliance in his own eyes that lit up the tranquillity of hers.

Yes, her eyes were no longer tranquil. They burnt and blazed just as the heart-fires within her breast burnt and blazed.

As he gazed at the little picture a new reverence germinated within his heart. It was like some beautiful white lily—that suddenly sprouting veneration for this woman who must suffer as Fate

ordains that some women shall suffer at the hands of men.

And so, with resignation, peace came to Hubert at last. That night he fell into a restful sleep, and in the morning he rose newly heartened for whatever the world still held hid for him.

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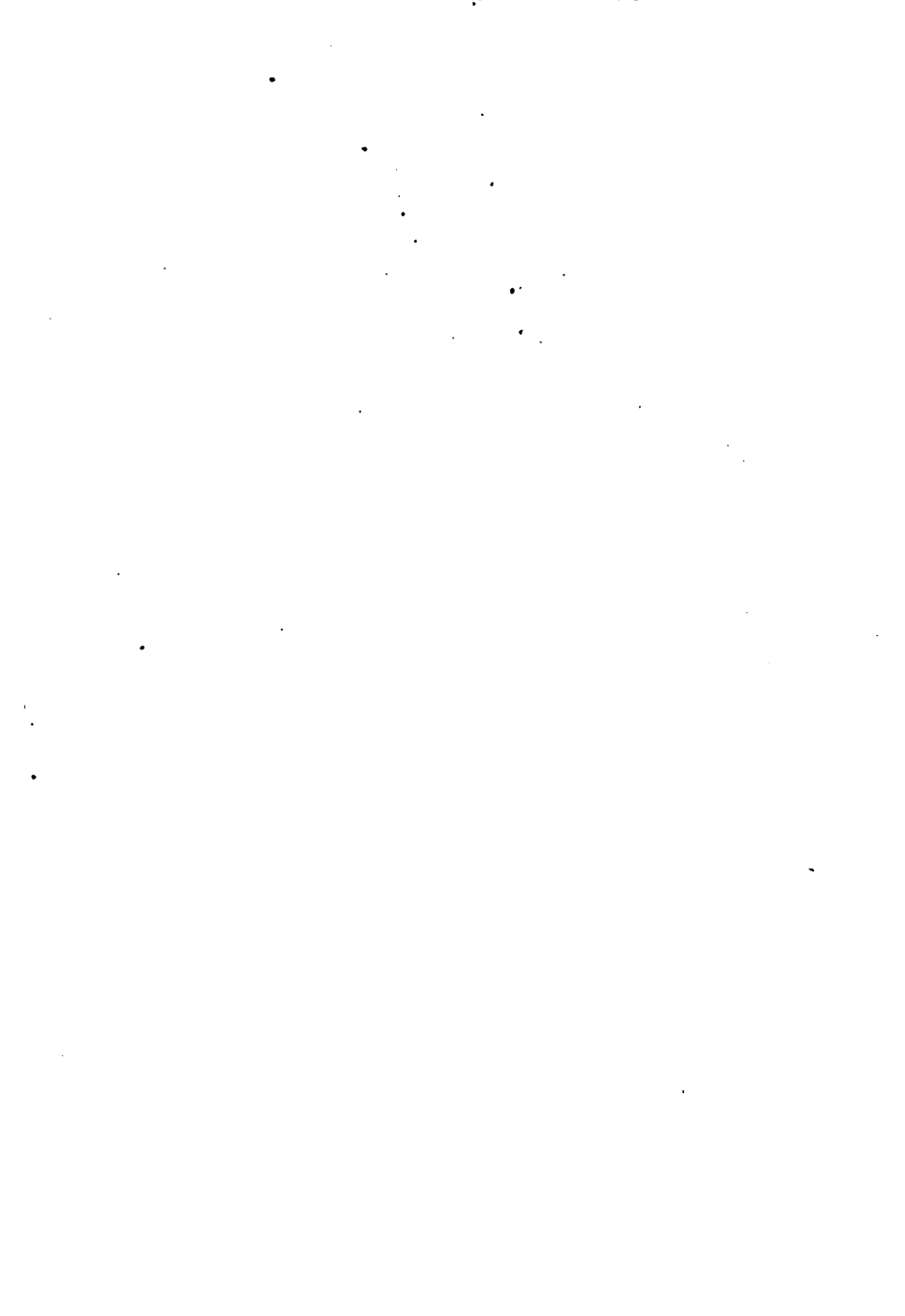
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